

Samuel (Mulka) Yaffe, born in Riga, Latvia, member of *Hashomer Hatzair-Netzach* managed to escape from the Soviet Union in 1945, at age 27, shortly after the end of World War Two. On his way to Israel he arrived in Italy, where he encountered members of the Jewish Brigade. Risking his own life he returned to Russia. Why?

He himself answers this question in a letter to a friend in Israel:

Milan, 28 September 1945

... In our city nearly everyone was murdered ... All that has happened to us cannot be told in writing ... I cannot be satisfied to just have saved myself while leaving behind hundreds of helpless people ... And so ... I cannot rest until I have done all I can to save the remnant, even if that puts me back in the lair of the evil beast, with no certainty that I will get out of there again ...

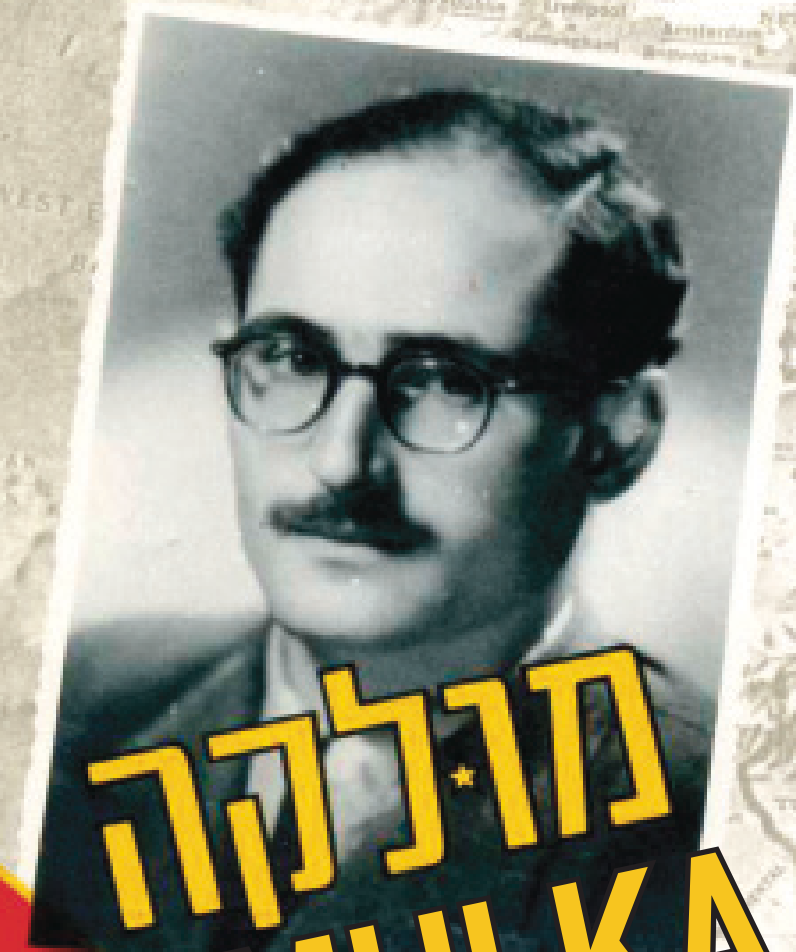
Yaffe paid with his life for the daring operation which he conceived, planned and executed, to smuggle members of his movement and other Jews stranded in the Soviet Union after the war across the Soviet border so that they could make their way to Israel. Toward the end of this daring enterprise he was arrested by Soviet security forces and sentenced to 25 years in a forced labor camp, where he perished. His friend Yacov Yanai, who was like a brother to him and worked with him, was also sentenced to 25 years. He survived, came to Israel and told Mulka's story.

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יעקב ינאי
Yacov Yanai

מולקה
MULKA

יעקב ינאי
Yacov Yanai



Mulka

**Escape from the USSR
1945–1946**

Yacov Yanai

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In this book I have not attempted to explain and describe in detail the exploits of each of the participants in the Bricha movement from the Soviet Republics of Latvia and Lithuania in the years 1945–1946.

I have instead tried to concentrate on the activities of the founder, Samuel Yaffe of blessed memory, and the activists around him who succeeded in smuggling about 450 souls—men, women and children—safely across the Soviet border.

The activists whose names do not appear or whose activities are not properly acknowledged should not feel slighted. This book cannot present the whole story; it was not my intention to be a historian, whose role it would be to research, detail, elaborate, and interpret his evidence.

Yacov Yanai

This book by Yacov Yanai is a personal memoir written as a tribute to a friend who gave his own life to rescue others. At the time of its writing many of the people who escaped from the Soviet Union thanks to the efforts of Yacov Yanai and Mulka Yaffe were still alive. Some forty years after the events described in this memoir, Yanai took the opportunity to give a detailed accounting of what happened, where and why. Members of my own family benefited from his and his friend's sacrifices. I would not be who I am without them.

Yacov Yanai died shortly after finishing this book. Had he lived, he would have seen to an English translation. Since this was not to be, I felt obligated to take this project upon myself and make this book available to a larger audience.

I would like to thank the late Eda Yanai for her trust in me to make this happen, and Ron Yanai, Itzhak Elyashiv and Dana Hollander for their support. Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my late husband, Zander Hollander, who made it possible for me to pursue this project.

Vita Hollander

Washington, December 2012

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End of the Line

Why did I not understand? How could it have happened that I did not fully understand what he was thinking? I was so sure that, as usual, he was setting up some kind of trick, some ploy or stratagem; and as a planner, he was second to none ...

Once he matured—and the more so after he became entangled in the Soviet whirlwind, made all the more overwhelming by the war—the extent of his resourcefulness was revealed. Suddenly he demonstrated this gift of interpreting the rules and regulations of the powers-that-be to suit his needs; he would use the contradictions between rules and reality to construct whatever he needed. Insisting on “every citizen’s rights,” he exploited the ignorance and suspicion of petty clerks for his own ends. Aided by the lawless indifference of corrupt, money-grubbing managers, more than a few of whom were barely literate, he simply outsmarted them, creating a paper trail of utter contradictions that neutralized the confused adversary to the point where “No” meant Yes and “Yes”, No. Again and again he worked his special spell, that particular magic of a very presentable-looking young man ...

An agent named Sidorov, ordered to win my trust with an interrogation more gentle than his predecessor’s, tried to set me up as the straight man, against Mulka: “Yaffe,” he hissed angrily, jaws clenched, “Yaffe is a shady operator, a manipulator!” And when I raised my eyebrows at him in genuine surprise, he added, infuriated but restrained, “Anywhere Yaffe has been, you know you’re going to find deception, tricks, forgery, bribes, fraud ...”

I smiled inwardly: What a compliment from a senior interrogator in the Soviet security services! What a roundabout admission of impotence, of having failed to put a stop to our activities before it was too late!

Eight years after that complimentary outburst by Sidorov, I failed to accurately read Mulka Yaffe’s intentions. I never imagined that he would stick to his decision to starve himself until his jailors would be obliged to free him as someone without hope of rehabilitation. It is a generally accepted custom that when a prisoner has passed the point of utter collapse, so that there is no longer any point in keeping him locked up, he is released—and anyway it’s preferable, for the sake of the numbers, to have fewer people die in prison. Hence the authorities had to find some ruse to keep the camp’s gates shut, this particular time, for Samuel Yaffe. The free (non-inmate) doctors and the Special Operations officers would be forgiven if they “made a mistake” this time in their medical diagnosis and if Yaffe then died in the camp; just imagine if a prisoner like him were to be released, and subsequently discovered to be alive and on the mend, somewhere beyond the fence.

Then what was really going on behind his self-imposed starvation?

Veteran detainees at the prisons and labor camps of the Soviet Union knew that during the course of a hunger strike, the striker reaches a point of no return, when his chances of recovery are slight, and when only experienced physicians who are committed to treating him properly and saving his life are likely to succeed in doing so. And who knows whether doctors like that will be available at the critical moment? Experience indeed has taught that sometimes a hunger striker decides to end his strike, but in vain, because he has left it too late. For Mulka, apparently, they found some kind of ploy (maybe a doctor, a friend, who was available when needed, but had been bought). Mulka, after all, was a long-time prisoner and must have been familiar with the stages of a hunger strike.

Since childhood, he had suffered mild digestive ailments. Perhaps, under prison conditions, these became worse, and the latent disease erupted with force? No, no; at the end, he had no problem surviving in the camp. Ruth was vigilant and sent him food packages whenever she found anything to send and was permitted to send it. Among the prisoners, his stature was high, and while he functioned as a construction engineer, there is no doubt that he forged good personal connections with prisoners and with free laborers alike.

One might well have supposed that he would try to obtain an early release on the pretext of a stomach ailment that could not be healed in prison. He would never have dared to starve himself beyond the point of no return. Nor does it seem possible that precisely at that time, just after the death of Stalin, he would have opted for a kind of “liberty or death!” scenario.

From the few letters that reached me from Mulka, it appeared that he had not declared a hunger strike. In other words, he received nourishment periodically from some kind of food, but he claimed—perhaps with reason—that his body was not able to digest it. Meanwhile, his weight dropped and his strength ebbed. Great firmness of purpose and an iron will are required to withstand the torments of hunger for many months, and the more so when food is available in relative abundance ... how—I wondered—does a starving man overcome the urge to put out his hand and taste some of it? There was no way around the idea that there had been some kind of secret arrangement, so that, at the appointed hour, the doctor/friend would recommend his release. Perhaps that was the right way, and justified the torment?

Did he know that the heads of the camp had figured out his covert intentions? One may assume he knew. When doctors recommended the release of a prisoner due to illness, the district court (which there is no reason to suppose was guided by the Special Operations Department) was obliged to hold a session inside the camp and decide whether the prisoner would be released to his family. If Mulka had passed this hurdle, the Department’s officers would have transferred him, frail and in pain, to a different camp, and they would have kept his medical file, so as to compel the doctors at the camp to which he had been transferred to begin

all the tests over again—time-consuming tests which he had already passed but for which there was no documentation. Then the new medical file would have gone to the office of the superintendant at this new camp, where they would decide when to present it to a court; but just before this body was to convene, the Special Operations Department at the new camp would transfer the sick man, on the same grounds as before, to a different camp, again without his medical file. And so it would have gone.

He could not have but known that the authorities had discovered his plan, because they were determined not to let this savvy prisoner leave the camp alive, a free man. Why did he go on? Why did he absolutely reject any attempt to persuade him not to have any part in this game whose conclusion was already set, and in which failure meant to forfeit one's life?

Maybe ... Maybe I was the only one who could have stopped him. Maybe he would have listened to me. But between him and me were the snow-filled tundra and taiga, sprawling over thousands of kilometers, barbed wire fences, armed patrols, sentries ... Corresponding with one another was forbidden, and a letter dispatched in some roundabout way might reach him a long time later, if at all ...

In the fall of 1955, nine years after he was imprisoned, I received a package from him that had been sent by Vera. Along with various necessities of the kind generally sent to prisoners, there, sure enough, was the agreed-on tube of toothpaste. I found somewhere to be alone—not an easy thing to do in a camp—and I opened it. From the tube emerged a condom, and inside that was a letter ... Cursed Soviet product! The condom was damaged; it had holes in it. The toothpaste had ruined Mulka's letter; the writing was completely illegible. My efforts to somehow discern, or guess, what was written there were to no avail. I destroyed the tube and all its contents, leaving no trace. What a bitter disappointment!

Had the letter contained any explanation or hint of his purpose? And if he had written to me that he was determined to struggle to the end—in both senses—would I have been able, even had I been at his side, to turn him from that purpose? Would I have been able to explain to a dying man that he would accomplish nothing, that he was mistaken, that he had to stop the hunger strike, stop starving himself and afflicting himself, and have mercy—for God's sake!—have mercy and let himself live; because something was happening in the country—Stalin was dead, dead, dead ... which meant that, just maybe, we might get to Palestine?

At the end of February, I received a letter sent to me at the Omsk camp by a relative who lived in Riga. It said, obliquely, that Ruth had been summoned to the Riga office of the security services and advised that her brother Samuel Lazarevich Yaffe was dead.

The Plan

I see myself standing in the deserted train station in Riga, on the platform for the westbound line. An engine pulling dozens of railway cars thunders by. The cars are locked. There is no way of knowing whom or what they are transporting. From the platform of the last car, bringing up the rear of the long line, a not-very-tall soldier smiles at me; he is wearing a greenish-gray uniform and his peaked cap has a five-pointed red star. The Red Army, with its equipment, is moving to the seaport where, under an agreement imposed by Moscow on the Baltic states, one of its bases has been established.

The Red Army ... The romantic stories of a revolution, of battles drenched in blood, a cruel civil war; tales of heroism, of sacrifice and of suffering; the army of Isaak Babel and his *Red Cavalry*; catchy marching tunes, which lend themselves so naturally to Hebrew lyrics in place of the original ... This is Russia, Russia the wild and hungry, whose language shaped my own; whose writers, poets, and composers were my first small window into a vast other world; this is the Russia of pogroms and of the expulsion of Jews, of Cossacks and shouts of “to the slaughter”; this is the Russia that became the Soviet Union, whose purges of its leaders were so strange and whose hunger so palpable (like the food packages sent by my mother to Aunt Liba); this is the Russia of stories by Lassia and Elik and Lyuba and other emissaries from *Eretz Yisrael*—all of them originally from Russia—about the Russian *Shomer Hatzair* underground; about the camouflaged *kibbutzei hachshara* (training communes) of *Hechalutz* (the umbrella organization of the Zionist-Socialist youth movements); about imprisonments in Kharkov and expulsions to Kazakhstan; about borders crossed in secret in the dark of night; this is the Russia of our “liaison bureau” in Riga, referred to obliquely, yet known to be the connection linking members of the dying movement there and the members here and in Palestine.

This is Russia, the Soviet Socialist land, a socialism not ours, but my older brother’s, nine years older than I, who had already served two years in prison on account of it, during which time our mother, every Friday, had taken huge food packages there for him and his cellmates.

We, of course, were against this socialism, called “communism.” We were for the socialism of elections, the non-violent socialism. And yet perhaps there, in Russia, the dark days thought to presage the Messiah were heralding a new world, also not ours; a world in which, as Mayakovsky said, the voice of authority was that of a Mauser pistol?

Many were the generations of the post-Romantic era. The stormy, exciting, rousing days of revolution—these, we had missed. Our lot was to wait patiently

for our “certificates” (under the British-imposed immigration quota) and meanwhile—to train ourselves and our young comrades for the pioneering kibbutz life. We were born too late ...

The sealed train and the short soldier with the funny hat, did they herald an end to routine? Was there trouble coming? And if we were fated to have trouble now, whence would it come—from east or west?

Thin trickles of refugees from Germany were passing through our locations on their way to Sweden. In our home in Riga, we hosted two young women, Ursula and Erika. Ursula and Erika—what names! Are they Jewish?

And about two years later—refugees from Poland, bearing depressing news. In Palestine, the troubles were continuing. The British were again trimming the “schedule”—the quota of certificates; the White Paper was published; the 18th Zionist Congress convened ...

We named our movement’s new paramilitary youth company “*Hanita*.”

The members of the training kibbutzim have been waiting for months to immigrate, after already having been “approved” in the *Eretz Yisrael* office. But certificates? No. In some of the satellite cities, there was a discernible easing of suspense. Not in Riga. We had tension and ferment—hooting in ridicule at neckties and high-heeled shoes, at long pants, lipstick, neat haircuts and tango-waltz-foxtrot ... The movement clubhouse was our real home, and on weekends we would go on marches, bearing heavy packs, for dozens of kilometers on the roads, along the railway lines, on forest tracks, and along the winding banks of the river.

Why? Because!

“Olive oil can go to hell / Long live the homeless!” The song that was recorded. The provocative slogan.

Nehemia, our headquarters chief, is going to Palestine—and our Herzliya company is disbanding. The time has come for us, the youth, to shoulder the responsibility for the movement. Mulka is leaving to give training at Liepaja; Lyubka—to Dvinsk; Duska—to Tallinn, capital of Estonia. I remain in Riga. Nehemia is replaced at headquarters by Yitzhak. Many of us leave for training.

Our group, including Gamli the Silent (it was his nickname), has dispersed but has not disbanded. The bond remains, and we meet at every opportunity; we exchange letters, awaiting what is to come.

The authorities begin conscripting our members for the Latvian army. Among the conscripts is Mulka. Because of poor vision—he wears eyeglasses—he is exempted from combat service and is to serve in a support force.

“If I’m going to serve in the army, it would be worthwhile to learn soldiering for use in Palestine later on,” he explains to us, and proves to the doctors incontrovertibly that his vision is good enough for a soldier in the ranks. His wish is

granted. A Jew insisting on a combat role will be a good soldier even if his vision is a little under par.

With the coup by Karlis Ulmanis and his takeover of the government in 1934, the Latvian people's struggle with the challenge of democracy was halted. Thereafter, we operated as a kind of legal underground. The activities of the various parties, organizations and companies came to an end, including those of our movement as one of the left-leaning movements (although we are counted with the Russian-Latvian *Shomer Hatzair* faction, not the Polish, which fathered the *Kibbutz Artzi*) that negated Soviet-style communism in principle. For about two years, we met in private homes and in the forest. Willy-nilly, we played the underground game. But to the nationalist Latvian authorities, our existence as an organization was not terribly important; they knew we were socialists "for export," with no pretensions to impose on the Latvian people the ideas of Borokhov or to force the more right-wing farmers to set up communes in the style of Kinneret and Kfar Giladi. All the movements and organizations oriented toward labor in the Land of Israel were left to unite legally in a single framework as "emigrants." Now that we were all under one roof, with a clubhouse, we were no longer obliged to hold our meetings in private homes or in the forest.

Our rival in the Zionist movement was *Betar*. There was almost no contact between the two camps, especially after the 18th Zionist Congress. Sometimes this created a rift within a single household. But at school, despite occasionally hysterical arguments, life dictated cooperation (against the teachers? out of student solidarity?) and relations between members of the two movements were correct, and even good.

On the Jewish street, the observant who made common cause with the regime were becoming more powerful. Younger people tended more and more toward *Betar*, which was legal. In *Betar*, unlike our *Shomer Hatzair*, going for *hachshara* (training) and making *aliya* to Palestine were optional, not obligatory; and they, the *Betar* members, also dressed up in fancy attire and marched colorfully on parade while we, operating quasi-underground, had to make do with white shirts. Our secondary school students were prohibited from continuing their studies at university, since higher education had no validity from our standpoint: the Land of Israel needed pioneering settlers, not a "pseudo-intelligentsia"; for them, the *Betar* youth, university was a haven. For us, meanwhile, the training camp had become a dead end, since certificates were unobtainable and the few immigration permits that found their way to remote Latvia were assigned only to the most senior of the senior ranks. Not to *Betar* people, of course; given the political and philosophical rifts, they did not receive their share of the certificates; hence their only recourse was illegal immigration. And we? Somehow, given the rift, we refrained from making our way illegally to Palestine. Our leaders there were very late in embracing it.

In late summer of 1939, a group of “ours” finally embarked for Palestine, without certificates—and succeeded in reaching their destination. I was promised consideration as a candidate for *aliya* in this manner with one of the next groups. But on September 1st, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. The European routes were disrupted. The way to Palestine was blocked.

A few months later, the Red Army occupied the Baltic countries. All the political, social, and even sports organizations, including the Jewish ones, were dispersed.

Suddenly we had become citizens of a country called the USSR—the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The educational trends of that time among Latvian Jews of the middle and upper classes, like my family and the Yaffe family, were as follows:

My brother, nine years my senior, was sent to a religious school where secular subjects got short shrift and the emphasis was on Torah study. Later my mother decided to move him to a Jewish school where the language of instruction was Russian. My brother insisted on attending high school at a secondary school (gymnasium, grammar school)) where the language of instruction was Yiddish. Most of the teachers at that school were in the *Bund*, but many students were receptive to Communist ideas, the more so as those of the *Bund* were waning. A Jewish anti-Zionist party, the *Bund*’s greatest day was during the era of the 1905 revolution, and it was harshly suppressed by the Tsar’s regime. Some twelve years later, the Communists gained control of the giant neighboring country, and the *Bund* was again a rising star. At my brother’s school, young Communist underground cells were formed; but most of their members were exposed over time and sent to a Latvian prison (the “lucky” ones who managed to steal across the border to the USSR were eliminated in Stalin’s purge during the thirties).

My mother sent my sister to a Russian girls’ school. A Jewish girl from a good family was supposed to acquire an education in a foreign language. This institution was run by devout Russian spinsters, who were faithful to the assassinated Tsar and to the Church; but for the Jewish students, a considerable number, a Jewish teacher was brought in who taught them their letters in Hebrew, a few prayers and blessings, and some verses from the Book of Genesis.

In line with the emancipation of the daughters of Israel and the cosmopolitan trends that found their way to the Latvian capital was my sister’s admission to the faculty of law at the University of Latvia, and, concurrently, to the English College founded by the British Council.

The national-secular stream won full recognition in our house when my mother sent me to the Hebrew secondary school, where all the studies were conducted in Sephardic Hebrew, along the lines of the Gymnasia Herzliya in Tel Aviv, and where the prevalent spirit was secular Zionist (during Torah lessons,

a head covering was optional, not mandatory). It was typical of the times that a Jewish mother concerned for her son's future would put her faith in modern Hebrew; meaning, she felt sure that if he succeeded in his studies he would be accepted eventually to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

In the Yaffe family, too, trends were mixed. The parents, of Russian origin, spoke Russian with one another. During the First World War, they had been stuck in Berlin and their daughters Ruth and Yehudith were born there. Alongside a Germanized Yiddish, the language of the Jews of Western Latvia was German, like the language of the German minority in Latvia, and in Riga there were even ultra-pure German schools, as well as Jewish schools whose language of instruction was German. Ruth and Yehudith actually studied at an aristocratic German school intended for German girls. Ruth even managed to graduate there but Yehudith, still a student when the Nazis came to power, was forced to finish high school at a German-Jewish institution after the German school was "cleansed" of all Jews.

In the Yaffe family, it was the youngest child who personified the national trend in education. The infant Samuel, that is, Muli (in German) or Mulka (in Russian), was sent to the kindergarten adjacent to the Hebrew secondary school. There, in first grade, known as the preparatory year, we first met.

Languages spoken in the Yaffe household were German or Russian, while at our house it was Yiddish. This difference was to some extent symbolic of the slightly lower social status of our family. Indeed for quite some time—maybe a year, or even two—after we met as schoolmates in the classroom, my relationship with Mulka was, to phrase it diplomatically, "polite," and nothing more. The head of the family, Eliezer Yaffe, scion of a dynasty of brilliant students, had a thorough knowledge of Hebrew. The learned and well-to-do Yaffe family retained private tutors to teach its children English.

The sounds of Yiddish, Russian, German and Hebrew, occasionally even Latvian, English and French, heard from the homes of Jews in our environment, did not (yet) signify conscious assimilation. We lived among a series of different nations, close or distant, and they made their mark historically, but the Jews remained Jews despite their increasing curiosity for a taste of foreign cultures. For any who but wished it, Riga—the somewhat cosmopolitan capital city—offered libraries and museums, theater and concerts, opera and ballet of reasonable quality.

The brief interlude of calm between the two world wars enabled our generation to acquire a general liberal humanistic education, seasoned with the traditions of the Torah and a renascent Jewish literature.

It was just time enough.

In our high school, there were teachers and principals who left a significant im-

pression on our spiritual world, and others whose influence we barely registered; there were marvelous masters of their fields and others teaching a given subject by happenstance, the kind who are looking for a livelihood and end up teaching. Some we remember fondly and others disappeared more or less completely from our recollection. Indelibly engraved on our memory are the Russian caretaker and his wife—a childless couple whose lives were completely dedicated to the students: From our first day in kindergarten until the day we finally graduated and earned our long-awaited diplomas, this couple were there, six days a week, unfailingly coming to the rescue, cleaning the classrooms and corridors, searching for some little tyke's lost overshoes, encouraging the tardy, reassuring worried mothers and even smuggling cheat sheets into the examination room.

At recess time, the schoolyard in summer or the corridor in winter served us as stage, cafeteria, playground and playing field; the arena for fistfights, the quiet corner for solitude before an examination (always fateful), the bazaar for exchanging photos of famous athletes, and the clubhouse for raucous political debates that spilled over into the classroom, frequently with raised voices and heated arguments that sparked lingering personal animosities ... Here you would find devotees of books, skis, film stars, all kinds of stickers, football, music, ear-phones as refuge, postage stamps—everyone had his own private and wonderful passion ... But there was one exceptional mania, one that topped all the others and left you no peace, firing your imagination, opening before you a whole new world and sweeping you away entirely, with no escape: In your class, or maybe in a class above you, was someone who took you along to the *Shomer Hatzair* clubhouse, and you were enslaved by the magic there to the point where everything at home and at school paled alongside the excitement of joining young men and women you had not previously known, freed of all discipline except that of “the movement,” enthusiastic, poised for action, prepared for any mission that might be asked of them.

At the club, a different perspective emerged on the land known to you from Bible lessons. Instead of prophets of long ago thundering about justice, and judges and kings intent on war, you have young people from your own city, from your own movement, people you know by name. The kibbutz and its philosophical, social and emotional message has become your own personal dream. There, in a clubhouse or in the classroom, you are thrust into political and historical arguments with friends and adversaries, arguments spilling over into issues of what is permitted and what prohibited, what is ethical and what is not; you are gripped by the aspiration to resolve all of society's problems so that complete justice can once and for all reign ...

A front is opened at home. Your parents try to call a halt—in vain—to the enthusiasm of their adolescent son. They are terribly afraid of “politics” in general and of the very real threat that their child will be drawn into it. They fear that

he will neglect his studies at school and his piano lessons, and the piano teacher insists that the child is extremely talented ...

And our house wasn't the only one. The youth movement was unpopular with many parents. Not so at Mulka's house, however, and I was jealous. His father, Eliezer Yaffe, brought his two fresh-faced daughters to the *Shomer Hatzair* clubhouse located in a proletarian suburb, and turned them over to one of the *mad-richim* (counselors), an uncombed youth with open collar, proud of his gray shirt, worn-out trousers and heavy shoes—"tanks," we called them. Mulka followed his sisters there.

Hashomer Hatzair flew a flag of youthful revolution: against parents, against school, against social norms, hypocrisy, everything bourgeois, religion ... even against adolescents in the movement.

The group, and after it the company, were your family; the clubhouse, your home. Your route to training camp and *aliya* to "your" kibbutz—this was the only path from which there was no deviation; this is the objective for which you are striving, and to which your whole life is dedicated.

Remember, you swore the Scouts' oath!

On every side there are fierce ideological arguments, impassioned debates, historical-philosophical justifications and accusations during confrontations with the young people of *Betar*, the Communists and *Bund* members, and with the pampered adherents of popular culture (disparagingly referred to as *noar hazahav*, the "golden youth"). The arguments increase your faith in the complete justice of your cause (for you are the only one paying attention to your arguments), with no room for second thoughts, while the arguments of your adversaries are rejected out of hand as null and void, erroneous, faulty and untenable, mendacious, nothing but gossip, willfully blind, wicked in intent, even advantageous to the enemy ... your path, and only your path, is right, correct, wise, unique, with salvation guaranteed ...

Oh, Eastern Europe!

The Soviets quickly solidified their control of the Baltic nations, eastern Poland and Moldova—and the emissaries from Palestine hurried back to their kibbutzim. Lyuba, the emissary from *Afikim*, sadly joined us for a consultation conducted at the main headquarters. Since prior to his immigration to Palestine he'd had some experience with Zionist activity in the Soviet Union, he didn't think we'd be able to hold on for very long.

But our underground experience kept growing. After the pro-Fascist coup in May of 1934, we went underground, although it was a deluxe version of underground: None of us was arrested, and only a few were invited to the Political Bureau—the division of the Ministry of the Interior that supervised the Communists—where we were "cautioned."

During one argument as I explained to one of these politbureau clerks that we were only organizing wildlife outings to observe nature, in the forest and at the seashore, I was asked with a wink: “And do you sing the ‘Internationale’ there?” Without waiting for an answer, he dismissed me.

We knew that the dreaded Soviet NKVD—the People’s Commissariat (later, Ministry) of Internal Affairs did not summon people just to caution them. “They” come, they imprison, they interrogate and they demand the names of all the others. From our “Russian” members and emissaries and from the echoes of the purges of the thirties, which reached even us, we knew—or anyhow, we felt—that the Soviets intended to do away with any independent faction other than their own, even physically.

How then does one go underground, under such conditions? And the main thing: to what purpose? What would it accomplish? If the way to Palestine was blocked, what could an underground achieve? The land and sea borders of the Soviet Union were hermetically sealed; we had no intention of preaching Zionism to the Jews of the Soviet Union; we sensed that those Jews identified with the regime or had not yet recuperated from the terrors of the purges. Would time teach them a lesson? There could be no answer to such a question, less a question than a wish. Reason whispered that we would have to grin and bear it: *Ish l’ohalecha yisra’el*. But how could a man abandon his past? Must he take up bookkeeping, literature, engineering, music, just to earn some kind of academic degree—and that’s the end of it?

A living being, even when severely wounded, tries to go on breathing. What oxygen we still had was running out, but we imagined that we could continue to hang on.

Later we heard that there were escape routes here and there. From Lithuania, Jews were leaving for the Far East via the Soviet Union and from there making their way to Palestine: We heard stories about people who had managed to get to Romania, and from there ... Who knows? They might be saying in Kishinev or Kovno that from Riga it was possible to sneak across the border in the hold of a ship sailing to Sweden ...

Yitzhak, chief of the main headquarters, divided the underground in two: members of the *hachshara* (training camp), and members of the movement. In an underground, of course, one’s outward behavior must be completely natural, so it was decided that people who generally had socialized with each other before the arrival of the Soviets would continue to get together afterwards, too. Only later did we find out that the Soviets had another viewpoint: Citizens with a record of prior “deviations” must conspicuously recant and publicly take leave of their “cursed past.”

We decided to set up a system of cells, in linked trios. The one responsible for

his two comrades in the trio would stay in touch with the one responsible for the next trio, and so forth. This structure was not outstandingly sophisticated nor was it innovative: one must assume that, had war not broken out within less than a year, we would have been caught very soon.

To run the underground of *hachshara* graduates, Yitzhak appointed Michael Bachmat, and to head our underground in Riga, he appointed me.

And Mulka? “Mulka has to be reserved for special missions ...,” Yitzhak told me, and I did not protest, nor did I ask for an explanation of “special.”

The day arrived for disbanding our *Shomer Hatzair* office in Riga. In the assembly hall of the clubhouse, I arranged the companies in groups, standing in rows, for a final farewell parade. A short speech, the singing of *Hatikva*, (which became the national anthem of Israel) and *Tehazakna* (the Zionist socialist anthem) ... dismissed ... and it's over!

Our people, of course, could not believe it: All of that, just “for them,” for the authorities; and now there would be a new chapter, “the Russian chapter,” in our activities—underground, our own version of things.

Zalman hid the flag of the disbanding movement somewhere in the forest, where the young scouts used to take their oaths in a festive ceremony and swear “to be loyal to the laboring Land of Israel, to help everyone at all times and to hold fast to the laws of the Scouts.”

Summer evenings are long. The students have free time. Those employed in workshops do their tasks casually between one workers' assembly and the next. The *Komsomol* (Young Communist League) leaders call on young people to join the camp of those building the future. Our youth go for walks in the city parks, along its bustling streets and alleyways, along the riverbank—meeting and parting, wandering around in pairs that become, later in the evening, foursomes, groups of eight, to whispers of “Here come the *Shomer Hatzair* people.”

How were we to combat the aura of secretive amusement that seemed to hover over our people? Their belief that the movement hadn't really disbanded, their certainty that the activities would be continuing covertly under a new organizational structure, worried us. Tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, we would not escape the sweeping arrests and incarcerations.

I consulted secretly with the inner circle of the faithful from the company I led. I summoned members whom no one would have believed capable of deserting the movement, and assigned them the task of disillusioning the walkers on the streets and in the parks who were whispering aloud of the underground to be created—precisely these stalwarts would announce that they were leaving us. And indeed, as we had discussed, at my request the seeds of confusion were sown. These young fellows, known for their commitment and loyalty, put on a show of “it's all over now!” and were very persuasive.

As the ember that fell among cedars, the summer rekindled our movement.

Within a month or two, we began forming the trios, as planned. This was a deep underground, based on mutual trust. Only one of each threesome knew who their contact was.

And what content was cast in this mould? Challenges were not lacking: Accumulating information from Palestine and disseminating it, rescuing Hebrew books that disappeared from the public libraries, learning about Zionism, defending oneself intellectually from the Soviet brainwashing, cultivating personal ties with people outside the underground in order to influence them.

No, there was nothing in all of this of the romance surrounding our predecessors in the *Shomrim* (Guards) during its early years in Soviet Russia—the *Shomrim* in Odessa, in Homel, in Kharkov ...

Most of the Jewish young people were reasonably satisfied at school, where there was a rapid adjustment to the realities of the new state, in the evening workshops controlled by the *Komsomol*, at the workplace, and in Soviet-style entertainment. The innovation in style and content was about ideas and therefore stimulating—films saturated with optimism, boisterous Red Army entertainment troops, simplistic theatre, professional circuses, evening readings of Mayakovsky's poetry, concerts by distinguished musicians catering to refined tastes, and lectures, lectures, and more lectures, without end.

During those weeks and months of the autumn of 1940, when the local Communists just out of prison or just emerged from the underground were still respected, one could still argue in public, still ask the occasional trenchant question about Communist doctrine. The atmosphere was still relatively tolerant of those to whom one was not obliged "to explain pleasantly how we would attain our exalted goal." The Jewish Communists, ruthlessly hunted during the previous regime, had good memories of those affluent Jews, the "masters of the house," who actually had taken care of them and given them cover for an hour when they needed it.

Mulka decided he had no interest in continuing his military service. What was the point of serving in the Soviet army, or any other army, if the way to Palestine was blocked? It would be better to study something in the civilian sphere. In the Red Army, more than in the Latvian military, high standards of health were meticulously adhered to, but Mulka's efforts to "change direction"—he claimed that the Latvian army had not checked his vision properly and had not discovered its impairment—were interpreted by the Soviet medical officers as dissembling. They investigated and examined, injected medicines into his eyes, admitted him to their hospital, yelled at him, threatened, but finally wrote him an exemption and sent him home. His persistence paid off.

Mulka was from the “hostile class.” The plywood factory of which his father was part owner was nationalized. To be more kosher, and to earn additional points on his university entrance examinations, Mulka had to be one of the chosen—of the working class. Whereas, if and when he arrived at a kibbutz, the training awaiting him there would enable him to equip himself for manual labor.

The work Mulka chose was a cover for investigating the possibilities of getting to Palestine, not merely the means of obtaining points for his academic studies. All of us, Mulka in particular, were preoccupied with the problem of breaching the locked gates—in this case, the exit, not the entrance gates—so he went to work at the Riga Port Expansion Authority, and concurrently registered for night school in mathematics and science, so as to be accepted to the department for the construction of hydrological facilities.

Mulka’s going to work at the port was a fitting interpretation of Yitzhak’s decision to leave him outside the framework of the trios and use him for special missions, when the time came. Our connection became somewhat looser now. We met only on Sundays, since eight hours a day of physical labor at the port plus four more hours at night school did not leave him much free time.

I went to study at a Conservatory. I had “glatt kosher” proletarian credentials: My father was a lifelong wage-earner who never exploited the labor of others. Thanks to my father the worker, I also received a modest stipend and had the leisure to organize the work of the underground. Meetings with the members, including those whose adviser I was, were reduced to the absolute minimum. Brahms’ Paganini Variations had captured my heart; this was partly due to my new teacher, the brilliant pianist Sergei Tagar, whom the students greatly admired. I am sure it never occurred to him that the Latvians among them would be the first to turn him over to the Nazis.

This life, under the less than one year old Soviet occupation, which had not yet managed to destroy completely the social and economic fabric of the Baltic states, came to an end on the 22nd of June, 1941, when Hitler’s forces, moving east, invaded on a broad front stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.

Two weeks before the invasion that changed the course of history, the Soviet authorities were busy “purging” the Baltic nations. Into the cattle-cars at railway stations near the big cities, Soviet security people shoved Latvian army officers and erstwhile key political functionaries, intellectuals who refused to toe the Communist Party’s political line, members of the “bourgeoisie”—i.e., property-owners and the well-to-do—and other “deviants”; these were shipped eastward to forced labor camps or exile in Siberia and the northern Arctic. It was a broad, sweeping wave of arrests, which during the prior year had been preceded by a long series of similar actions on a more modest scale. This time, in addition to those directly purged, the arrests included many members of their families, un-

less they had managed to flee in time. The detainees and their scant baggage were loaded into the cars, splitting many families apart, although others were sent into exile in their entirety, at least initially.

Likewise many Jews defined as “bourgeois” or “nationalistic” found themselves, that same long night, in railway cars stinking of disinfectant. The determination as to who was “bourgeois” and who was “nationalistic” was often completely arbitrary.

Logically, a decisive criterion for deportation was the version of information provided by secret agents, who had not yet accustomed themselves to the demands of their overseers, and new adherents of the Soviet regime also took the opportunity to settle personal accounts with their adversaries. Thus many inconsequential figures—small-time agents, neighborhood grocers—found themselves side-by-side with renowned industrialists and large-scale employers. The wealthier people still at large, wondering how this evil had unaccountably passed them by, spent every night with an ear to the radio and eyes on the front door, terrified at the slightest sound.

Prominent Zionist Jews, *Bund* members, well-known community figures and others—and of course anyone deemed a “Capitalist shark”—were arrested during this massive purge, if they had not been arrested already. Many were killed, a few survived; some even reached Palestine.

The newspapers and the radio did not report the arrests, and the news was received only by word of mouth. No one knew how intensive or extensive the purge was, and the tension mounted.

The war with Germany came as a surprise to many. Incredibly, the wary Stalin took Hitler at his word and thought the pact they had signed was still valid and in force. Containers of crude oil and railway cars full of wheat moved as before from Russia toward the German border.

A year after the Soviet conquest, the Baltic countries and eastern Poland sat undefended before the German advance. The only useful defensive measure taken, apparently, was the decree banning “enemies of the people”—the trusted Soviet remedy for any social malady, political dilemma or military disaster.

Tyrants have their own logic.

On Sunday, June 22, 1941, the Nazi battalions executed their blitzkrieg to the east. In two days they conquered large parts of Lithuania and western Latvia. By Friday there was chaos in Riga, and on July first the Germans entered the city, to shouts of joy from many Latvians there.

Since the outbreak of the war, I had been in a very bad state. What would happen if the Germans conquered the city? In my childhood, I’d heard horror stories about the First World War, the expulsion of Jews from our places to faraway Russia, the food shortages. But the German invaders back then did not abuse the

population. This time, I knew, there would be no “enlightened conquest.” We had heard through the grapevine about what was going on in western Poland, which was in German hands; the Nazis’ actions in Europe and their plans for the Jews were already known. Until the Soviet conquest we had read about it in the local press, especially the Jewish press, and in the papers that arrived from Palestine and Europe. After the Soviets’ arrival, we were obliged to listen secretly to Western radio broadcasts. The Soviets did not permit news bulletins that might embarrass “their friends” the Germans.

Although I was worried about what the Germans would do, I was more afraid of what the Latvians would do. Their hatred of Jews was overtaking even their hatred of the conquerors from the East.

Many of the Jewish youth in Eastern Europe who joined the Communist camp after the Bolshevik revolution had also joined the underground at some point. These young Jews represented a very high percentage of the prisoners of the monarchies in Poland, Romania and the Baltic states, far beyond the percentage of local young people—and they were uneasy now, unable to suppress their misgivings. They were stupefied by the far-fetched allegations leveled at the victims of the purges in the USSR. Many of their friends who had fled to Soviet Russia in the thirties, were later imprisoned there as “spies” or even executed as “enemies of the people” or “class enemies.” It was hard to believe that your good and true friend from the Communist underground in Kovno, Bialystok or in Iassy—the same fellow who shared his bread with you in the murky cell of a “bourgeois” jail, and had not succumbed to torture in the cellars of the Fascist secret police but remained faithful to the idea of the revolution—had actually been, all that time, an agent of that same bourgeois secret police from which he had fled. Suddenly we were supposed to believe that he had been in the pay of the *Siguranta* (Romanian Secret Service), the *Ochranka* (Tsarist-era secret services), or some other “bourgeois” intelligence service, and that, since his flight to the USSR, he had been occupied there with trying to blow up coal mines in the Donetsk valley, or poisoning the cattle feed in a *kolkhoz* ...

Toward the end of the thirties, meanwhile, signs of Russian nationalism coming out of Moscow became more marked, so that the covert antennae of the Jews, always alert for any static in the signal, sensed some suggestion of anti-Semitism. And yet, despite the doubts, the questions, and the effort it took to make excuses for these goings-on, most of the Jewish Communists remained faithful to Moscow and its leaders. Possibly it was the growing Nazi danger that caused them to remain in the Communist fold. Their confusion was tremendous when Molotov and Ribbentrop put their signatures to a new German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, but they went to great lengths to explain even that.

If truth be told, it is not surprising that there were Jews who were hooked by Communism around that time; ordinary Jews, the *amcha*, synagogue-goers, and

even members of the propertied class evinced a certain sympathy toward Moscow. In those times, as Europe was falling apart right before their eyes, requiring them to choose between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia—there can be no doubt as to which the Jews would have supported, especially given the disappointment with the West European democracies, surrendering one after another to the Nazis. Only England still held out, thanks to the Channel separating the British Isles from the German enemy.

Beggars can't be choosers, as the saying goes. We, the Jews, were forced to choose between bad and worse.

Meantime when the Soviets are accused of official and unofficial anti-Semitism, they respond, with an affectation of self-righteousness, that it's nothing but a bald-faced lie: How could they, who had made great efforts to rescue the Jews who fled to the USSR to escape the Nazis, now be accused of anti-Semitism? The truth is that the Soviet authorities did not warn the Jews about what was in store for them nor urge them to flee to the east. Those who fled, fled; those who remained paid the terrible price.

From towns thrown into a panic at the time of the invasion, Jews fled under their own power or else remained where they were. Generally, the ones who managed to get away were those who took control of the few vehicles available. In the towns where there was an organized evacuation, the authorities, under covering fire by the Soviet Army, rescued members of the security services, party clerks and state apparatchiks, and workers in various state industries—and such Jews as were among them left with everyone else in these organizations, travelling east. Anyone without connections to some institution or organization that was being evacuated had to fend for himself.

Possibly the Soviet authorities had no choice. Perhaps they behaved just as the French, the Dutch, or the Norwegians would have done in their place, but one thing is certain: No particular effort was made to save the Jews. The story of a determined rescue was born only after the war, as a stratagem to combat allegations of anti-Semitism. There is not a shred of truth in it.

During the period between the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and the outbreak of war between the two countries, the Soviet media publicized not one iota of what the Nazis were inflicting on the Jews in the territories they conquered. One may assume that many Jews simply did not know what the invaders were preparing for them and for that reason alone remained where they were instead of taking flight—and were killed.

No, the Soviet authorities gave no warning. They themselves were surprised—like Stalin.

The dreadful feeling that the Latvians would massacre the Jews was growing on Friday, June 27, 1941, around one o'clock in the afternoon, amid the mass commo-

tion of the start of the evacuation of the capital city, Riga. That morning, which had been amazingly quiet, I was trying to get in touch with Mulka and I telephoned the Yaffe house. His father told me that Mulka had gone to work.

“To work, on a day like this?”

His father’s voice was subdued. The conversation came to a halt, and he put down the receiver without saying anything more.

I was unable to locate my brother. His wife was in the hospital at the time. My parents and I had moved a few days earlier to my sister’s place, where she lived with her husband and three-year-old son across from the Interior Ministry building. We thought that we might figure out what was going on at the front, based on the behavior of the internal security people.

On that same Friday, I saw some individual Soviet soldiers, exhausted almost to death, hungry and thirsty, many of them wounded, making their way through the silent city, looking for their commanders. I did not see a single unit making an orderly retreat. Throughout the day, trucks loaded with Soviet families and their belongings were moving eastward, but in the city itself there were still troops from the security services. I saw their reaction when, at one in the afternoon, Nazi agents tried to instigate rebellion and sow panic: From one house, some of whose residents were under suspicion, every last person—including old people and infants—were taken to the marketplace by armed people in uniform, and there shot to death. There were rumors to the effect that Latvian-born German Nazis who had gone the year before to Germany as “repatriates” had been parachuted into the area. We heard shots. From time to time there were alarms, and echoes of explosions from around the city. The telephone was still working, and thanks to that, I committed to memory as many of the addresses as possible of our family in Gorky on the River Volga, and in Sverdlovsk in the Ural Mountains—so that we might get out after all, and reach somewhere safe.

That night and the next day and night we spent in the basement of the house across from the Interior Ministry, on a cement floor. On Sunday morning when everything was quiet, we took whatever we could carry on our backs and the little food we had and made our way on foot to the train station: my mother and father, my sister and brother-in-law, their children, and me.

The lovely city was awash in rays of light from the sunrise. The streets were empty of people and vehicles. We seemed to be the only living beings outdoors in the entire city, and it seemed deserted indoors, too. But as we approached the train station, more and more Jewish families joined the hurried procession, all heading the same way.

We passed the elegant Conservatory building and my heart was heavy: maybe we would succeed in getting away from here, fleeing to the east, but would that be the route that would bring us to Palestine? At least we would not be returning to this city; we would not be coming back here and seeing it again.

I have trouble now comprehending the cruel feelings I felt then toward my birthplace. Perhaps the tendency to look back fondly on the past is, for many people, a matter of age. At that time, I was twenty-two, disappointed with my failure to reach Palestine, and astounded at the Latvians' hatred of Jews.

I returned to post-Holocaust Riga in 1945—for a few months—and was shocked at what I saw. Between 1957 and 1960, I visited there secretly five times and saw the city rehabilitated and relaxed. I searched in my heart for some affection for the house and the school of my early years, the place where I made some dear friends—and did not find it.

The streets, the alleyways, the gardens and the beautiful houses still held too many dreadful sights ...

No; even today, in my heart, I feel no yearning for that city.

Gamli (Gamliel) Blaushild was the youngest of a group of five in the group who called themselves the *Herrenclub* (the Gentlemen's Club), after an aristocratic political group in Germany. Our friends thought the name amusing. Gamli, a student at a technical school, quiet and introverted, slow of speech, with a sense of humor grounded in some other, imaginary world—he was from western Latvia, an area influenced by German culture—integrated into the life of the group and did educational work with the younger ones. A short time before the Soviets conquered Latvia, he went for hachshara, but our connection endured. In the underground, he was put in charge of a trio, and at that time he also began studying at night in a technical school. Many others who had neglected their studies, to be active in the movement or for ideological reasons, also went back to studying at that point.

When war broke out, Gamli was on the night shift at the factory where he was working. Only five days later, the factory in the midst of upheaval, he went out into the streets hoping to meet one of our people so they could talk about what should be done. He met Mulka's parents, who told him that they were not planning to leave the city. Gamli's mother decided likewise. A widow, who had work but barely made a living, she did not believe that things would be worse for her if the Germans came. The naiveté of Mulka's parents and Gamli's mother, as with so many others, cost them their lives.

Gamli hurried to call Mulka, and the two of them decided to leave the city first thing in the morning. At six, Gamli took his backpack and left the house. Soviet soldiers, singly and in small groups, were retreating eastward. Mulka had a bicycle, but since Gamli didn't have one, Mulka left his and they proceeded on foot. En route, they met some of their friends, with their families, but they did not join them. Hurrying onward, they boarded the first freight train that came along and reached the border of Estonia, where they began the military chapter of their lives.

Their challenge was how to make their way rapidly to a Soviet unit that was

being organized there. Since its mission was to cleanse the area of armed groups of Estonian rebels who had risen against the retreating Red Army, only confirmed party members were being accepted into its ranks. But they met someone they knew there who was able to arrange things for them, and they received weapons. With another twenty or so people, among them also my brother, who had made his way to the same place—armed with a machine gun, grenades, and pistols; whatever came to hand—they went out looking for the Estonian rebels. The unit advanced—or, more accurately, retreated—northward, while skirmishing with enemy units. The effort to check the enemy succeeded, and the commander complimented the fighters. In one of the battles, involving control of a certain hill, the enemy discovered our young men and opened fire. Gamli was wounded in the leg, bandaged, and left to await evacuation to a hospital. It was a day of hard fighting, and the fighting continued. Gamli began to lose consciousness. Mulka found a vehicle, drove to an Estonian village near the German front, and—using a revolver—“enlisted” a doctor and returned with him to the place where his friend was lying wounded. But Gamli was not there; he had meanwhile been taken along with another unit heading north.

Mulka was now free to look after himself. While he sought a doctor for Gamli, he himself had shrapnel wounds in his ribcage area. When he learned that Gamli had been evacuated, he went to a medic, who removed some of the shrapnel and told him to get himself to a hospital as soon as possible. Later, the medics loaded Mulka, by that time unconscious, on their transport and brought him to the hospital at Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, where he underwent surgery rather casually done. The German bombardment of the city obliged headquarters to evacuate the hospital to Leningrad, and the patients and medical staff were boarded on a ship headed east, which reached its destination despite being repeatedly bombarded en route. The doctor on duty explored Mulka’s wound and extracted another few pieces of shrapnel, telling him: “I have no time to clean out all the shrapnel in your chest. You see how many patients are waiting for me. I’ve done my best. When you get away from the front, find a hospital and they will finish the job. Meanwhile, you’ll be all right as you are.”

The shrapnel stayed in his chest for the rest of his life.

Mulka began searching for Gamli as soon as he left the hospital, but found no trace of him. In the chaos of such a large city under siege, as the Germans tightened their grip, finding Gamli was impossible.

Gamli was operated on in some hospital and moved to Tallinn where he arrived in time to be evacuated to Leningrad. There he was hospitalized for a lengthy period and then, a few days before Leningrad also came under siege, he was evacuated far behind the lines to Sverdlovsk in the Ural Mountains, where his convalescence lasted for many months.

My brother Eliyahu emerged unscathed from the fighting in Estonia, retreated with his unit to the outskirts of Leningrad, and participated in the defense of the city. On the first day of Succoth, in the fall of 1941, he was killed in battle.

Sixteen years later, I wandered among the palaces of the Tsars, looking for the place where he fell. In the south of Leningrad, the authorities placed metal plaques engraved with a few sentences in memory of the soldiers who gave their lives to stop the enemy advance. I found no graves of those brothers. At the offices of the city council, no one knew where the casualties had been taken for burial.

Most of Riga was silent, as if deserted. The Soviet authorities had disappeared. The Germans were yet to be seen. Local people thirsty for revenge against the Russians were still cautious about emerging into the daylight.

One by one or in family groups, loaded down with suitcases large and small, bags, boxes, hand luggage and packages of all kinds, people hurried to the long line of railway cars standing in the city's central train station. The vast majority of these people were Jews.

We found a place in one of the cars, waiting with unbearable hope and taut nerves to get underway, eastbound ... Meanwhile, more families were crowding inside. The cars were filled to overflowing with men and women, old people and infants. People arriving with large suitcases and boxes met with wrathful stares from others. All the seats were taken and the latecomers had to make do with the corridors and passageways, sitting on their belongings or on the floor, or even standing. Family members who had seats traded places periodically with those who were standing, and all were afraid to leave the car for fear that the train would get underway at any moment. The air was suffocating on that hot day toward the end of June. The children in the overcrowded carriage were as yet still suffering in silence. The tension, and the anxious desire to be underway, and the fear, silenced even the very young. We waited, nerve-wracked, for an engine to arrive.

In the evening, the chill air was fresher. We tried to sleep sitting up. Here and there came a surprised exclamation as people discovered family members, friends, someone they had lost in the chaos that had descended on the city.

With no official announcements, rumors were rife, most of them optimistic: The Germans had been dealt a serious blow at Lithuania; the Red Army in Poland had broken through to the West; the German air force was taking losses ... People were sorely in need of mutual encouragement, wanting to believe that Stalin's pronouncement that "The enemy will be defeated! Our victory is assured!" was more than an empty promise. The sight of the Red Army tanks streaming from the east less than a year earlier had not been forgotten and it seemed important not to sow doubt and panic.

Based on these rumors, some people even left the train and returned to their homes in the city. The calm that reigned there was deceptive, suggesting that somehow, apparently, the Germans had been repulsed.

At long last, the train departed for the east. I felt a tremendous need to move around and was unable to sit still and do nothing. Moving between the cars on my sorties for drinking water or to the toilet, I met friends—the bunch from *hachshara*, Folia, Tzila, Bila and sisters Leah and Sima; Kopel and, with him, two more young people whom I did not remember having seen before: Moussia and Bela.

To organize ourselves into one coherent unit was not possible. All the seats were occupied and to leave them, even for a moment or two, left you standing on your feet unless someone was saving your seat for you. We also feared that the train might contain secret police or just ordinary informers, who would report to the authorities any evidence of collective Zionist activity. In wartime, that could mean summary justice in the field. We made do with staying in visual contact.

But where were all the other young men and women from our movement? Where were Mulka, Lyuba, Gamli, Leibl, David ...

Some 30, 40, or even 50 nerve-wracking hours later—who remembers how long it was?—the engine was coupled to the train. The eastbound journey began, and it was all about crowding, hunger, thirst, dirt, bombs from enemy planes, lack of sleep, swollen feet, women fainting, children crying, murmured prayers, meaningless conversation and rumors, rumors, rumors ...

For nine days and nights the train crawled heavily on, without supervision, with no one in charge or responsible, no oversight, and nobody whatsoever in authority, for no one had undertaken to provide any. Periodically, when the drivers switched places with their alternates, the train stopped in the middle of nowhere temporarily, passing straight through the stations, occasionally taking on coal and water. No one knew the destination. We read the signs in the stations going by, followed the course of the sun and were able to determine one thing for certain: we were heading east. When we crossed the old border, which only a year earlier had divided Latvia and the Soviet Union, we breathed easier. Somehow we believe that within Russia itself the enemy would never arrive; without a doubt, the Red Army would defend the border and prevent an invasion.

Two airplanes attacked the train. We stopped. Many people jumped off. A few bombs fell around us. Women and men shielded their children with their own bodies, prostrate. Young people sprinted away, then back. Finally the train rolled again until, a few hours later, came another bombing, another stop, more running about.

Hunger, thirst, and fatigue left their mark. Where were they taking us? Where would we end up, and when? Where would they eventually tell us: “Stay here a few days until we repulse the Germans”? Where would we get a cup of hot, sweet

tea, a slice of bread and butter, a bowl of soup? Why couldn't we buy anything, not even bread? And what did it mean that the village women we happened to pass at stations far from the front, deep inside Russia, were out looking for food?

Many people, women especially, found their legs were swollen, but no one complained aloud; no one yelled. We were still a disciplined group, restrained, with our impulses in check, our behavior even polite.

On the ninth day of the journey, the long train entered the station of Yaroslavl, administrative center of its district in northern Russia, with half a million residents. This was an industrial center known elsewhere by the trucks bearing the city's name.

We received an indifferent welcome; possibly the tension was to blame. The city was living through a difficult time—conscription of its men, work in 10 to 12 hour shifts, and the lines of women growing longer outside the food shops, which were selling only bread rations. We were not there long, however. The train resumed its journey until finally reaching Antropovo, a station surrounded by large *kolkhozy* (Soviet-style agricultural communes). Family by family, the passengers climbed onto farm carts pulled by slow-moving horses and moved away along the dirt roads toward the communes, designated to absorb the refugees.

Almost fainting from this last journey of several hours in the squeaking carts, we arrived in darkness at our *kolkhoz*. We chewed what little bread was given to us, drank boiled water, and fell asleep on the straw mattresses.

From comfortable, modern, noisy Riga where food was plentiful, we were plucked away to land in this remote, hungry village with no electricity. We shuddered at the enormity of it: far, so far from home, from any sort of normal place to live. How long would this nightmare last? When would we go back where we belonged?

Later it emerged that, at that point, Jews had already been massacred in the streets of that same city to which we longed to return from the remote *kolkhoz*.

That first shock ...

In my innocence, I thought I knew a lot about the Soviet Union. I had read books, and in the last year I had talked face-to-face with officers of the Soviet army. I imagined that I had developed the ability to differentiate between what was written in Soviet newspapers and broadcast on Soviet radio, and reality. It was only now, however—cast deep into the interior of the country—that I realized the power of propaganda when it is concentrated, directed, continuous, stupefying, totally brainwashing. How could logic hold its own against such power—without any prior, direct, personal experience?

I asked myself more than once all those embarrassing questions about the Soviet Union, especially after 1937. My father travelled there in the early 1930s and spent six months representing a wood import company, and his reports about

life there were reliable. Hearing about something, however, is not like seeing it first-hand.

The poverty of the *kolkhozy* was outrageous. War had broken out only three weeks earlier, yet clearly life could not have deteriorated to such an extent in such a short time. Nor did the farmers—or more precisely, the women who were left in the *kolkhoz*—claim that the shortages stemmed from the war. “We’ve lived this way for years,” they told us, but we refused to comprehend how people could live in such impossible conditions: food scarce, clothing tattered, permanent shortages in basic necessities, primitive working methods and tools, famished farm animals, no electricity and no vehicles other than a tractor, and roads like something from medieval times.

The staple food consisted of bread and onions; the most common beverage was *kvass*—the Russian national drink (a kind of beverage made of bread soaked in water). Onions were not plentiful; meat was seldom seen.

Our parents remembered the poverty so widespread in Russia during the era of the Tsar. I had read the wonderful Russian literature that portrayed the poverty and ignorance of the miserable farmers. But the Soviet reality now confronting me was far sadder and more depressing.

The *kolkhozy* had deteriorated even further once all the men able to work had gone to the cities. The exhausting farm work was done now by women and old people. Most of these rural families were unstable, without a male breadwinner; many children did not know who their father was; some mothers could not remember who had made them pregnant.

Now the last of the men were drafted.

The shocking reality of life in the *kolkhoz*, revealed just as it was, taught me an edifying lesson about the Soviet regime. I was immunized against some of the surprises yet to come.



At the army induction center in Leningrad, they were not sure exactly what kind of soldier was standing there before them. Mulka’s unit did not exist and its name appeared on no list of any sort. It had been spontaneously organized and its remnants were put into regular units. There, facing the Special Department officer stood a Jewish youth, from Latvia which was temporarily occupied by the enemy, and he had no personnel file ... Who would be able to find out anything about this bespectacled young man? Where in Leningrad would there be any information about him? He was not in any condition to fight at this point; what use was he in Leningrad?

The officer fixed his gaze on Mulka and said: “Samuel Lazarevich Yaffe, I am obliged to release you from military service. You must leave the city at the first

opportunity. Latvia is temporarily in enemy hands. Where would you prefer to go on your release?”

On the wall of the officer's room there was a large map of the Soviet Union. Mulka stepped up to the map and noted that the shortest route to Palestine in the current situation was via Persia. He asked the officer to send him to Ashkabad, capital of the Republic of Turkmenistan.

“I had a feeling that from that city, a few kilometers from the border of Persia, I could figure out some strategy to get to Palestine, and on the way from Leningrad to Ashkabad I would try to find some people from our *hevreh* (from the movement)”, he told me when we finally met later, and wondered whether perhaps the parents had changed their minds at the last moment and left Riga after all, and where were Ruth and her husband, where was the wounded Gamli ...

His parents had the address for his sister Yehudith, in Jerusalem, and Mulka decided finally that the one open route was across the expanse of Lake Ladoga, which the Germans were continually shelling. Nor was it easy to squeeze through the long line of people waiting to get out.

Now Mulka discovered that, in the preface to the *spravka* (certificate) documenting his demobilization from the army, there appeared the name of the all-powerful Special Department—the military arm of the security service. This fearsome entity was dispatching one Sergeant Yaffe to Ashkabad, and it would be wise not to argue unnecessarily with their envoy ...

Mulka generally took pains with his appearance. Even when he was starved for bread, sleeping outdoors under the open sky—one never knew what the day might bring: He made sure his clothes were clean and even owned a shoe brush, not something every soldier had in his kit or even knew what to do with. A handsome and energetic young man, Mulka had the look of an sophisticated European with manners to match; he was equipped with the mysterious certificate; and stuck to his shirt was a bit of red cloth signifying a soldier wounded in battle. Like Special Department officers everywhere in the country, he knew how to speak with authority, jump a queue without anyone daring to demur, flourish the mysterious certificate with its impressive signature, and show some temper with clerks who failed to grasp the urgency of his mission to Ashkabad.

In a railway carriage making its way east, Mulka met two Latvians, one a member of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party, his companion a senior clerk in the administration of the republic. Neither of them knew a word of Russian. Mulka spoke for them. To his documentation from “the department” were now rapidly added two impressive new documents—one bearing the stamp of the “Council of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia” and another, with a likeness of Lenin engraved in its upper left corner, issued by “The Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party.” Who would dare to denigrate his mission?

Winter was coming. We all realized that, if we were not rescued from the *kolkhoz* where we had been flung, we would risk annihilation under the difficult living conditions there, including the work in various branches of the *kolkhoz*, which we would be unable to survive. My sister was due to give birth within a few months, and both she and the child were in danger. The village women were openly concerned. They would shake their heads and tell my sister in their straightforward country way: “No, no. You won’t make it. You’re city people. You’ll die here, dear ...”

Everything was in chaos, the roads included. We gathered up the remnants of our bundles and headed for Sverdlovsk in the Urals. As for our relative who lived there—we had never set eyes on her. We hung about for several days seeking an opportunity to board a train carriage or sneak onto the platform between two cars, and indeed one day we managed to get seats on one of the trains for the women and the child with my sister-in-law, and a few days later my father and I succeeded in sneaking into an empty coal car. Our intention was to travel eastward. On the way we had to “change horses” in Kirov, and we took the opportunity to visit the office of the Republic of Latvia in this diaspora, where we registered ourselves along with the address of our relative in Sverdlovsk, in case my brother or one of our friends came looking for us.

The journey in the coal car and what came afterwards were a nightmare, but my father did not complain; at the stations, he would stand patiently in the endless queues for a ration of bread, while I ran around looking for anyone from our group. I knew that our friends who had landed in the area of “our” *kolkhoz* were also planning to leave, and I had also given them the address of our relative in Sverdlovsk. When we parted we did not know whether we would meet again, or where. The south had all of us mesmerized; it was warm there in winter; there was food there—and Palestine was closer.

In the winter, our family gathered at Sverdlovsk in my cousin Raya’s little two-room apartment, where she lived with her husband and her two children. Raya’s sister, the mother of two infants, had fled with the babies and her own aged mother from Gorky to Sverdlovsk, where they were staying with Raya. Now we arrived, from Riga: six more people. We heard no complaints and were warmly received, but we knew we were a burden on them. Moreover it was clear that in Sverdlovsk we would find it very difficult to bear the hardships of the cruel winter weather, as none of us had any suitable clothing.

When I visited the local conservatory, the deputy director checked my student credentials from Riga and instructed me to get in touch with the head of the Faculty of Piano, for an audition. Subsequently he heard me play and advised me that he could accept me in his department. At the administrative office, I was is-

sued a student card and told that as someone displaced from the area conquered by the enemy, I was entitled to housing in the dormitory. I suggested to my family that they continue south and see how it went there. They said that if they found things going badly in the south, while I was all right at the conservatory, they would come back north, whereas if they found things down south to be better, I could join them there.

I did not know that this family decision also needed the acquiescence of the security services of Sverdlovsk.

At the conservatory, I encountered no difficulties. Wonderful! But who would arrange the *propiska*—the registration of my address on my identity card—to verify that I was a resident of Sverdlovsk? Without a *propiska*, you are treated as deceased. You get no ration cards and are courting incarceration. I was asked to leave my personal documents with the secretary of the conservatory, so she could attend to the matter.

There would be no problems? I asked her.

No. Per a decision of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, of which the school has been informed, students who are admitted to continue their studies in cities to which they have been evacuated are entitled to a *propiska*.

Leaving her office, I was reassured. The next day, however, on arriving to collect my documents and move into the dormitory, I was told that there would be a delay. My identity card was of the “Latvian type.”

“Oh, nonsense—” I said; “I have no Soviet-type ID because the police in Riga did not finish implementing the changeover in documents. The people on our street had not yet had their turn when the war broke out, and thus we remained in that part of the city with the old Latvian documents. What’s the problem? You admitted Hanan M. from Riga, and he had the same kind of document ...” I asked the secretary to explain this to the police, and when she continued to demur, the director of the conservatory intervened on my behalf. When he, too, failed to persuade her, I asked to have my documents back and said I would go to the police myself.

The next day, I stationed myself at the end of a long line in front of the bureau of police. Thousands of refugees from the conquered west, who like me had fled to the Ural region, were seeking to set themselves up in Sverdlovsk until they could return to their homes. When my turn came, I explained my problem to the officer behind the little window, but he was unwilling to listen to me. Finally I persuaded him to give me a note to his superior—and once again waited in a nerve-wracking line, while people with connections of one sort or another were taken ahead of their turn. I stood and waited, exhausted, my stomach rumbling with hunger.

In the land of the Soviets, wracked by war and by shortages, one waited in a queue for everything—bread, a bit of soup at midday, a roll, a turn at the bath-

house, the cinema, to buy underwear, to use the toilet, to see the director, the secretary, for the train, for a water faucet, to read a newspaper tacked on an office wall, for an electrician, for a bus, for a doctor ... and meanwhile, those waiting put their lives at risk in attempting to fend off the line-jumpers elbowing their way to the head of the line with assistance from a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker, amidst shouts and fisticuffs and false protestations along the lines of, "I've been here since the morning, and this old lady in front of me will bear witness, where is she, the old witch? ..." Not to mention one's helplessness in confronting people who knew someone; or when faced with pregnant women, officers, disabled people, soldiers on their way to the front, conscripts, and all sorts of bullies and other types with a penchant for flattery, insolence, or violence ...

Who can describe the torments of standing in those endless Soviet queues, in the burning summer heat or the biting winter cold, in daylight and after nightfall—always with that anxiety about reaching the little window just at closing time and having it shut in your face, or reaching the counter just in time to see them sell the last of the bread you are entitled to; of having a clerk tell you, after an endless wait, that this matter is not something he deals with; of having the director, just as you are ushered into his office, called away to an urgent meeting—"and I won't be back at all today" ...

These were the queues that appeared after the invasion, the queues whose hour had come ... not that there was any dearth of queuing in the past. From the grandmothers who had stood in many a line in their time, you could hear about the institution of queuing back to the days of the revolution and the civil war, the great famine in the Volga region, the Ukraine in the thirties, and in Kuban, and during the war with Finland, and "in our area in Kazan" ... "What does a young fellow like you know about queues?"

I got to the proper officer. I explained, briefly, how the bureaucratic maze had trapped me, and I clarified that it was a gross abrogation of Ruling Number Such-and-Such by the Supreme Soviet. He remained impassive. When I told him that my account could be verified by the office of the representative of the Latvian Republic (and there was such an office), he requested a bit impatiently that I get lost. There was something in his voice that persuaded me to comply.

I went back to the conservatory. The deputy director, furious, telephoned someone at the Party executive, and the regional Party secretary for educational and cultural affairs agreed that it was an outrage, contravening an explicit order of the Supreme Soviet, and added that my case would henceforth be handled by Captain Cholmansky of the NKVD—an officer whose name is spoken in a whisper while glancing left and right ...

So I went to the office of the NKVD. There I was told that Captain Cholmansky has office hours beginning at ten o'clock at night. I returned at the appointed hour and the duty officer explained that I must telephone using the internal line

and wait until I was called. At three in the morning a soldier appeared, checked that I did not have a weapon in my satchel, examined my documents, took firm hold of my arm and brought me to the captain's room. The latter then listened to my request, glanced at my paperwork and said, "Get out of here." And he called the soldier and ordered him to escort me from the room.

The next day, at the conservatory, I was told that this state of affairs was simply not possible. Comrade Bogtiryov, the honorable director of this academic institution, who "believed in the rights of the republic," would himself make whatever telephone calls were necessary. All I had to do was present myself once more to Cholmansky—"and you'll see!"

Comrade Bogtiryov telephoned. At ten pm Cholmansky was handed the telephone receiver by his aide.

"You're still here?!" he explained in surprise, and sent a soldier to fetch me.

In his office, he explained quietly and with restraint that I would have to get out of the city. Where could I go, I asked. Anywhere you like, he replied. When I tried once more to explain that I was told that I had a right to ... , he cut me off and emphasized that I must leave the city, "because that is my wish."

I went back to the conservatory. They were even more upset this time. More phone calls ensued, and that night, at ten, I dialed Cholmansky's number and put the receiver to my ear.

"You're still alive, Yacov Mendelevich?" asked the captain, astonished—as if informed earlier that I was already in the glorious afterworld, adding: "I told you I don't want you in Sverdlovsk. If you have not left the city within the next twenty-four hours, I will order you escorted out under armed guard. Is that clear?" And he hung up the phone.

At the conservatory, they were unable to restrain themselves. It's unlawful! An outrage! I should consult the prosecutor who oversees Interior Ministry activities! I took this advice and did so, and to my amazement there was no line at his door. A cordial young man heard my story and confirmed that justice was on my side. I felt tremendously relieved. When I asked the young man to telephone Cholmansky and explain about the law and so on, he advised me to take a different course: "Get out of the city—today," he said. "Go at least 101 kilometers from Sverdlovsk. Get yourself some work and let me know how you are doing. I will deal with your complaint and keep you informed. Understood?"

Understood. That same night, I took a train to Irbit.

My first-ever encounter with the internal security services of the Soviet Union, in the person of Captain Cholmansky, was both instructive and effective.

Are you still alive, Captain?

Why did I go to Irbit?

Simple logic suggested that I ought to leave Sverdlovsk and follow my parents,

but as yet I did not know their destination, and I thought I'd be better off waiting someplace near Sverdlovsk to hear from my brother and from my family and friends, whom I had told that I was staying there.

The town of Irbit was really only a large village. When the autumn rains came, its unpaved streets turned into a muddy swamp. The local authorities dealing with evacuees sent me to work in a leather-processing factory, with another five men from Lithuania, who spoke a little Russian and whom I never heard speaking their own language. In a narrow one-room flat housing a Jewish Ukrainian family who were also evacuees, they erected a partition of planks and the six of us slept there on the floor, our feet touching the wall on one side and the partition on the other. We could not stretch out comfortably all at one time, but because we were also working night shifts, we were able to make do. We received an expanded bread ration of 600 grams and when we could find no other food, we were hungry indeed. At one point the Lithuanians invited me to come with them to a field belonging to a *kolkhoz* outside the city, where we would dig for potatoes that the farmers had missed during the harvest: the workday for a laborer at a *kolkhoz* was measured in terms of the area he "covered," not by the weight of what he picked or dug, and thanks to this policy we were able to find enough food to keep going. After a night shift I had to rush to the field in the *kolkhoz*, bring home a sack of potatoes and prepare a meal ... but our hunger pangs left us no choice.

One morning on leaving for work, while it was still dark outside, I encountered a patrol marching towards me. I heard commands delivered in a decisive, hoarse voice: "Forward, sons of bitches! Forward! No peeking around, no falling behind, whores! Anyone out of formation will be shot without warning!" The sentry marching at the head of this group of hunched men clothed in tatters, their shoes sinking in the mud, gestured to me peremptorily with the hand holding his rifle to stand aside. It was a terrifying sight. No imagination was required to understand that this was a *kolona* (column) of prisoners—political? Criminal? What did it matter?—en route from a prison camp to their work site.

The work at the factory was tiring. We worked day and night, in 12-hour shifts, alternating every week. The physical effort required to stretch the dry hides, the continual standing on one's feet, and the aggravating hunger left me completely exhausted. At the edge of collapse, I was called to see the Jewish manager of the place and transferred to easier work, and on the day shift only. Not that twelve hours of sitting on a low bench were pleasant, but still! In the new job, I also found the people more congenial. Two of my fellow workers were Jews from Poland. How had they chanced to be in that place? When the Germans conquered western Poland they had fled to the east, and because they had no proper papers and crossed the border illegally, the Soviets had arrested them and sentenced them to three years. Later, when war broke out with Germany and Moscow signed a compact with the Polish General Sikorski, many—though not all—of

the Polish citizens in the camps were freed. Those released, including many Jews, found themselves work as best they could.

One day I received a letter, sent from a coal mine in the town of Yegorshino in the Sverdlovsk region. Three young men who were among the members of my “*Hag-alil*” unit in the movement had found their way to this remote place and been sent to work in the coal mines deep underground.

The work itself was tiring, but their lives were unbearable for other reasons. Coal miners in Russia were not known for gentle manners or courteous speech. Not one would have passed a test of protocol with the Soviet foreign ministry—most especially not the miners of the Ural Mountains, most of whom were criminals who had served their time in prison but were not permitted to return to where they had come from. Few people jump at the chance to mine coal, and the shortage of coal miners worsened due to military conscription. When three young men, all able to stand on their feet without assistance, turned up in that mining town, they were immediately taken on in the mines without the usual bureaucratic foot-dragging—without even the usual safety drills.

“The motherland needs every ton of coal!” trumpeted a handbill tacked to a wall.

Another version: “A freight-car of coal—a direct hit at the enemy!”

Or: “The home front sends its fighters a Communist greeting: Coal for the Motherland!”

Riga folk like Yashka Golman and Shmulik Rosenberg, known as Rozit, from the Hebrew High School in Riga, and Isaac Katz who had worked and made his own living—how could they resist? What would they not have done to help destroy the Nazi enemy?

The three young men became beasts of burden in that mining hell under conditions they had not read about in the books that I had, at one time, recommended to supplement my talks on the industrial revolution in England. Possibly the long working hours and the quality of the equipment were appropriate to the Yorkshire coal mines of a century or more ago, but the living conditions, the food they received for their ration coupons, the “workers’ solidarity” and a few other things that made up their daily lives were far less advanced than what had been available during that other long-ago revolution, already targeted by the early socialists.

I do not remember how the three of them managed to find me. In their brief note, they notified me of their whereabouts, and thus began a correspondence between us that reflected confusion and suffering:

My apartment does not deserve to be called a grave, even; and as to food, somehow I find it difficult to talk about that, because I have

only just had my lunch, and it reminds me that despite my physical need, I won't be eating anything again until tomorrow. Coping by lying down to sleep has been a failure, after several attempts made over a few days. You wake up, and it all begins again ... and the worst part is, I am losing my sense of humor.

And in fact there wasn't anything the slightest bit funny.

Yashka was drafted into the army in the fall of 1941 and with his unit made the long journey to Königsberg, now Kaliningrad, as an artilleryman. We remained in touch throughout the war.

Isaac and Rozik were able to get out of the Urals into Central Asia, to a most remote and forgotten place—but nearer to Palestine—called Kugai. They, too, were drafted, sent to the front, and survived, although wounded in battle.

■ ■ ■

In a garbled telegram that came to me, I could make out only two words: the name of the place where the telegram had originated, and the name of the sender. Actually the name of the sender was also garbled, but I guessed it was Mulka, who was in Sverdlovsk. Evidently he had found out where I was in Irbit.

To get out and get to Sverdlovsk was no easy matter. Anyone working in any kind of factory was deemed a conscript. To leave, I needed a letter of termination from the factory management as well as my personal documents (ID card, military card, cancellation of the *propiska*), and I had to return my food ration coupons—otherwise, the essential worker's employment ID would not be returned to me. Only after all that, could I try to obtain a train ticket. The factory was of course empowered to respond to my request for termination with an absolute "No." I don't remember what excuse I used, but the upheaval I provoked in the factory director's office was so persuasive that I got everything I needed within a short time, relatively speaking. Possibly the director had received the (accurate) information that my absence from his factory would not negatively affect the level of production there.

I packed all my belongings in a leather satchel that had been with me ever since I left home. I donned a brown leather overcoat, the likes of which I had not encountered since crossing the border of the Republic of Latvia. On my way to the train station, I found an old tire that had blown out, and I took it with me; my shoes were worn out and needed new soles, and an old tire would serve well in place of leather, which had disappeared from the marketplace.

When I arrived at the station, I found that I had no chance of obtaining a ticket. The queue was very long. Tickets were being sold only to those in possession of a properly signed travel order. Without the necessary papers, there was

no prospect of reaching Sverdlovsk. I thought it over and decided to bribe the conductor. When the train arrived, I tried out my strategy in a few of the cars, in vain. At the last moment I jumped aboard one of the cars—and the conductor demanded I pay a fine and disembark at the next station. When the train stopped, I ran to the ticket window, where the queue was barely moving. Necessity is the mother of invention: I ran around behind the building and charged into the ticket-seller's office. She gave the impression of never before having seen a man with spectacles, wearing a polished leather overcoat, carrying a leather satchel fit only for a very important manager, with a truck tire wedged under his arm and a ferocious expression on his face. This wise young woman opened her mouth, evidently to ask why I had come crashing into her office.

"A ticket!" I bellowed, thrusting a bill at her.

"Where to?" she asked, dumbfounded

"To Sverdlovsk, of course!" I replied, and clutched the ticket and the change before it could occur to her to ask for my travel order.

Leather satchel, leather overcoat ... managers are always in a hurry!

From the proximity of the ticket window rose the angry voices of the people at the front of the line, echoing after me as I stepped up into the car. I managed to find a bench on the upper level and promptly fell asleep.

About half an hour outside of Sverdlovsk, the conductor woke me: "Get your documents ready; the *obergrupp*a will be checking."

This was not good; definitely not good. Evidently security agents were going from car to car, checking passengers' documents, asking where to and why, scrutinizing the documents and making sure the travel order was properly signed, making sure there were no deserters from the army or from industrial plants. One objective of such checks was to stem the flow of refugees trying to make their way to the big city.

I took out all my documents and looked them over: having a lot of papers makes a good impression on security agents. I had my army discharge papers, verifying that I was not a deserter, heaven forbid; I had my ID papers with the proper *propiska* cancellation; I had a properly signed document from the state-owned leather factory, testifying to the fact that I no longer worked there and had resigned legally; I had my working papers and the verification that I had returned my ration coupons ... What was missing, I knew quite well. Would the agents doing the checking know too?

Through the open train window, I passed my collection of documents to the sergeant outside, adding even my old student ID card from the conservatory, written in pure Latvian.

The officer, receiving the package from the sergeant, looked through the documents in silence.

"Where are you going, comrade?"

“To Sverdlovsk, of course.”

“Where is your travel order?”

“I don’t need it. And who would give me one?”

“Why are you going to Sverdlovsk, what will you do there and why did you resign from your job?”

“Evidently you did not notice my student card, this one ... the green one ... ”

“I noticed. And what does this card have to do with the matter?”

“I have to report to the conservatory, for classes. Did you miss the directive of the Supreme Soviet, declaring that all evacuees who are students must—if the institution where they studied is in the territories temporarily conquered by the enemy—report immediately to the institution nearest to where they are?”

This was a “word for word” citation from a Supreme Soviet directive that had never existed, but the jargon sounded completely authentic.

The officer considered this and thought, apparently, that such a directive was only logical and in the spirit of the times; it might be that no one at headquarters had remembered to mention it to him ... All my documents were returned to me and the two agents moved on to my neighbor, who was already holding his papers ready in his hand.

A short while later, the train slowed and then stopped at the Sverdlovsk station. Mulka, who had met every train coming from the direction of Irbit, strode toward me, a tin container in his hand. From this he took out a portion of boiled fish—a treasure in those days—and held it out to me:

“Eat this, it’s good, it’s from the officers’ mess. And I have chocolate in my bag, too.”

I did not refuse. I would have been happy with boiled fish from the enlisted men’s mess.

On the train ticket Mulka had received in Leningrad, he was authorized to continue travelling to Tashkent via Novosibirsk and Alma-Ata, and not necessarily via the usual, and shorter, way—south to Chelyabinsk and from there to Tashkent and Ashkabad. When I asked why he had decided to take such a long circuitous journey with the travelling conditions as bad as they were, he replied that it was desirable to visit more places, including distant ones, wherever friends who had managed to escape the Germans might have ended up. Moreover he did not know whether his parents, at the last minute, had decided to leave Riga and whether his sister Ruth and her husband had managed to be evacuated eastward.

In Sverdlovsk, we created a kind of headquarters of all the “Latvians” who had registered with the republic’s representative office there, but we did not find our people on the lists. There was no trace of his parents or of Ruth or Gamli. Maybe we would be more successful in Novosibirsk or in Alma-Ata?

My question as to how we would set out when I did not even have a ticket was dismissed by Mulka with something to the effect that we’d cross that bridge when

we came to it. Sometimes he relied on intuition and improvisation, although generally he tended to plan ahead. The Special Department document he was carrying did its job; the uniform, the red stripe on his sleeve, and especially his authoritative bearing, his confident and impressive appearance, opened doors and helped him make connections.

From the office of the Latvian representative, Mulka had obtained a few documents that would satisfy the most finicky bureaucrat, including one that confirmed that I was travelling to my parents—an excellent pretext for the journey, should I need one.

We had a convivial parting from Raya and her household and left for the train station. We were hungry. No one had any idea when a train might come that would continue on towards Novosibirsk. Mulka gestured me to follow him as he mounted some stairs leading to the officers' restaurant, where he sat down at a table for two and told me to converse with him only in Latvian. I had no idea what he was up to, but he began chatting in that language, warning me, "Only Latvian. You don't know any other language!"

After a lengthy interlude, a waitress approached us. Mulka ordered two dinners. The waitress had no doubt that Mulka was an officer, although despite the impressive leather overcoat, my civilian appearance made her hesitant about serving me. Pleading made no headway. "We are permitted to serve only officers. They will punish me," she argued.

Dutifully carrying out my role, I smiled foolishly, as one who does not understand what is going on around him. And indeed, something happened—Mulka stood up, banged his fist on the table and demanded, "Fetch the manager here, immediately!" My curiosity was growing. I must confess that in my mind's eye I could already see two fierce, armed officers summoning us to clarify the matter at the local military headquarters ...

The manager, a hefty woman, appeared in the waitress's wake. She seemed indifferent and contemptuous, but before she could utter a word, Mulka lit into her:

"You sit here behind the lines, lazy people, hiding behind the combat soldiers ..." he shouted, adding elaborations in a way already too familiar, ending angrily with: "Do you have the nerve to refuse to serve our comrades, the Latvian partisans?"

As God is my witness, this is a verbatim report!

The restaurant manager had certainly had prior experience with unruly officers, in this case an officer who evidently had been wounded—possibly in the head—with behavioral consequences; and even if he lived long enough for the police to arrive, who would compensate her for the damage that might be perpetrated meanwhile? With a muttered "All right, no problem," she gestured to the unfortunate waitress and stalked away. The food was served, the waitress stammering something, but Mulka bore no grudge for her earlier disdain toward his

companion; he even smiled at her and wished her well in finding an upstanding young man, a statement right on target in those days of general military call-ups. The young woman smiled and even brought us a little gift: napkins.

The train entered the station, empty of passengers. The pushing and shoving began even before it had fully stopped. Mulka gave me his ticket and told me to come along and stay behind him. The platform looked like the arena in a wrestling match. The carriage doorways were guarded by conductors, most of them women. The windows were locked tight to prevent anyone from climbing in that way. I thought our chances were poor, but after a minute I saw my friend waving his Special Department papers at the conductor and disappearing within. Nor did seating me in the carriage cause much argument, thanks to the Special Department.

And so we travelled eastward.

By that time, and especially during the underground days of 1946, I had begun to wonder at the resourcefulness of a young man like that, from a “good home,” a young man who had never known the slightest want and certainly nothing of a war of survival, whose parents provided for his every material need, who didn’t even speak Russian well; who was not well acquainted with the literature, art, or way of life of the Russian nation, a nation ruled by a complicated, cruel, foolish, abusive, reckless and corrupt bureaucracy—a Russia whose laws and customs and traditions were designed to burden and embitter the hard lives of its citizens even in ordinary times, let alone during a devastating war like the one the country was now experiencing. How, from the moment he had been thrust into this Kafkaesque world, had Mulka been able to make his way through it like a fish in water? With elegance and a smile, exaggerating here, fabricating there, playing above all on the rampant corruption, with inventive stratagems worthy of an experienced con artist, exploiting *blat* (connections) and the comradeship of arms, relying on all kinds of “rights,” he was somehow able to evade all pitfalls in the mosaic of minefields that the Soviet Union had become!

Someone who has never fallen into such a Kafkaesque world as this might see such a description of a talent for getting by as a denunciation, praise that rather damns, the reverse of what was intended; but anyone who has learned personally and the hard way about the social yardsticks of the Soviet Union of that era—measures that were the complete opposite of what the regime and its propagandists were declaring—could not fail to appreciate, with a clean conscience, such a natural talent for immediate adaptation to an absurd set of circumstances, the more so when the aims of this adaptation were completely and utterly selfless.

In Novosibirsk we stopped, we wandered around the city, we visited the institutions that took care of evacuees, we looked for relatives and friends—all in vain.

Finally we boarded a train bound for Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan. I had the only ticket; Mulka would have to find an explanation for his presence in the carriage. This sort of trick had become routine—from the moment he entered the carriage, Mulka was shaping “public opinion” in our favor. His friendly behavior; his readiness to help fellow passengers, among whom were always a few wounded war veterans, identifiable by their uniforms and medals; his easy sociability and willingness to listen—all made it easy for him to accomplish his goal. When the “social climate” in the carriage inclined his way, with about half an hour until the tickets would be checked, Mulka would rub his hands together, relax his limbs, yawn and blink his eyes, then announce to all and sundry that the time had come for a nap. He’d climb up to the top level and settle himself comfortably with his face to the wall; within a few minutes, he was audibly snoring. As the conductors were heard to approach in the corridor, his snoring would get louder; one of the conductors eventually turned to the snoring passenger in the uniform to wake him up; first he would touch Mulka gently on the back, then pull on his leg and finally address him aloud as “Comrade Officer,” all in vain. The snoring continued unabated as musically as before.

The conductor would continue until one of the other passengers finally lost his patience. “Can’t you—” the passenger would berate the conductor, “Can’t you let him be?” Immediately another passenger would chime in, “Don’t you see the man is sleeping? Do you need eyeglasses?” And from another corner of the carriage someone would chime in, “Maybe he’s tired? Maybe he hasn’t slept for several nights?”

The conductor, especially when it was a male conductor, would now begin to learn the power of hostile public opinion.

“... Can’t you see that the man is coming from the front—that he was wounded there? Do you think he’s tired because he was checking tickets there? You see that he isn’t wandering around thousands of kilometers from the front and that he did not evade conscription! Let’s see what you can do against the Fascists ... let’s see you be a hero there!”

An atmosphere like that would force the conductor’s colleagues to pull him by the sleeve out into the corridor. As he exited the carriage, we could hear him muttering that he was only doing his job, while among the people standing out in the corridor, someone would add a defamatory statement about all these army deserters working as train conductors, and the retreat would become chaotic—and meanwhile, like background music, there was the gentle rhythm of snoring as the sleeper slept on.

We arrived without incident in Alma-Ata, the beautiful capital city of Kazakhstan. As always on arriving at any destination, we headed for the city’s main post office to see if any mail awaited us in the “hold until collected” general delivery section, or on the off chance that we might find, among the evacuees from all

over the occupied western areas, some of our own people or someone who might have even a shred of news about our people.

While we were speaking together in Hebrew, as usual, we noticed two young men looking at us. Their faces gave away their origins, and we guessed correctly: they, too, were Hebrew speakers, graduates of Gordonia (and possibly of *Hashomer Hatzair*) from Bialystok. Both, however, had arrived from Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, looking for friends or relatives ...

Hebrew, in the Soviet Union, was more than simply a language. A simple *shalom* or a cheeky *Hazak v'amatz!* (literally, "be strong and of good courage"; i.e., "go get'em'!") or an unpretentious *Me'ayin atah* ("where are you from?") were like a calling card or even a courageous political declaration, received as "I'm a Zionist" or "I'm a member of a pioneer movement" or just "I studied at a Hebrew school; you, too?"

Or could these two be provocateurs? Perhaps, although it was not reasonable that agents of the regime working in pairs would know anything about what was going on in the movement or use the jargon favored by our fellows ... but nonetheless—who knows?

"Where are you from? How are things in Tashkent? What are Jews doing there?"

Things took their natural course. The story was familiar. They had fled from the Germans, taking to the road, while their relatives had stayed behind in the areas under occupation.

When the main point was reached, meaning the search for a way to get to Palestine, we were relieved at what we heard. From Tashkent, they said, there was a route to Afghanistan. A Jew was handling this, by the name of Shtivelman. He was a lawyer from Moscow living now in Tashkent. They had his address (to write it down, or memorize it? Best to memorize it or write it in code); they were on the way to find their travelling companions and let them know ...

This little hop to Alma-Ata, which had made our journey longer, proved itself worthwhile; definitely worthwhile.

Tashkent, the city of sunlight and warmth, the city of bread and rice. Who has not read Neverov's book, "Tashkent, City of Bread"? The name of this bestseller became a symbol of rescue and attracted a large following during the war. Hordes of refugees found their way into the capital of Uzbekistan. Indeed compared to the more northern Soviet regions, that republic—especially its capital—was a paradise of markets overflowing with rice, fruit, vegetables, and sometimes meat as well, some clothing, shoes ... Of course, the prices were the inflated prices of an open market, but gradually we learned to live with the surrealistic regulations of the Soviet economy.

From the outset, Tashkent did not seem benevolent. Freezing cold, snow, contamination everywhere, and throngs of refugees crowded into a filthy field,

swarming with cheeky thieves—that was our first impression of the city. My relatives had already moved on to Namangan—a city in a quiet Uzbek district, but overrun with refugees.

We had stopped in Tashkent because of our interest in meeting with Shtivelman, and the day after arriving, we went looking for the address we had received from the fellow in Alma-Ata. The Muscovite lawyer, a man of about forty, lived in a flat of two or three rooms, arranged in the style of provincial European bureaucrats. Notably, however, for a refugee family, there was a striking difference between the poverty and chaos reigning all around and the air of serene plenty in this apartment stuffed with furnishings.

Shtivelman received us cordially, but surprised us with his spoken Hebrew. In the conversation that ensued he told us, among other things, of the pogrom-like atmosphere in Moscow as the Germans approached the city's outskirts.

Why did we not ask ourselves how a Muscovite of his age could speak such good Hebrew? Where could he have learned it—in an underground yeshiva of the Lubavitcher Hasids? And what of the Sephardic accent?

We told him that we had obtained his address from fellows that we had met, but he did not ask many questions. Finally we came to the matter that had brought us there. Shtivelman did not question us at length, he only said that he knew of two local smugglers—dealing mainly in drugs—who sent shipments to Afghanistan. These smugglers could get us to the border and from there we would have to continue by ourselves ... He didn't really know too much, actually ... When we asked how we could get in touch with the two, he told us at which corner of the main marketplace they could be found, in whose name we should approach them, and that was it ... Concerning payment and the other details, we would have to deal with the principals themselves.

We parted from Shtivelman, but met him several more times for advice, and when we lost track of the smugglers.

Why did we believe him? Why did we go to meet with smugglers?—if these guys really were smugglers? Why did we put at risk not just ourselves, but our families and several friends?

Undoubtedly, inexperience was a not inconsiderable factor in our readiness to be involved in this risky adventure, which was liable to be catastrophic for all of us. In our own defense may be cited our yearning for Palestine, the tantalizing proximity of the southern border of the Soviet Union, evidently permeable, and the temptation to cross it, along with placing a childish faith in someone because he spoke Hebrew—all of which contributed directly to our willingness to be involved in this dangerous affair.

It should also be said in our defense, that we were not the only

such innocents, or to put it less forgivingly, not the only such fools. We did not pay the heavy cost paid by others who had been similarly tempted. My future comrade in the forced labor camp, Yisrael Tzemach, and his friends, and several groups of Jews who had also landed in Tashkent or in Ashkabad, on the border with Iran—fell victim to similar provocations designed by the Soviet security services. All those people paid dearly for their naïveté—with their lives, or with long imprisonment in forced labor camps.

I imagine that Shtivelman was a provocateur, and if not, I must ask his pardon—in this world and in the world where all is good. At some point during the 1940s or the early 1950s, in a forced labor camp somewhere in the Arctic north, I was told that in an adjacent camp there was a Muscovite Jew named Shtivelman. I did not try to investigate whether this was “our friend” Shtivelman from Tashkent (which would not have been a simple thing to do); but I would not have been surprised to learn that it was the same man—dismissed without thanks, and sent to that forsaken place by his operators.

During one of the long nights of my interrogation in 1947 I was asked about our “Afghanistan affair.” The plan to steal across the border, crafted four years earlier, would have neither increased nor diminished the general accounting demanded of me. Aside from me and Mulka, all the participants in the “conspiracy” were already outside Soviet territory. Nor did the interrogator particularly linger on that episode, a relatively tame and unimportant one in a more tangled skein.

The two of us, Mulka and I, arrived at Namangan at the beginning of winter. We found my parents, my sister’s family and another couple we knew, all living in one room, resembling something between a stable and a cow barn. In the bed—the sole furniture in the room—slept my mother with her grandson, my sister’s son; the others slept on the floor. We were hungry. My father worked picking tomatoes, my mother tried selling what possessions the family still had. My sister gave birth and the baby died of starvation. Her husband was drafted and sent to the front, and did not come back.

Meantime Mulka had found out that his sister Ruth, with her infant, had landed in the large village of Zuyevka, not far from Kirov. Right then and there he decided that he had to set out immediately to bring her the news about Afghanistan. I thought that his journey across thousands of kilometers without a travel permit or money was a fool’s errand. But Mulka was alight with excitement at this adventure and it was clear that talking to him was useless.

Within a few days he had packed a bag and added a little bread; he shaved, polished his boots, said his farewells and left on his mission. His first stop

would be Isaac and Rozit in Kogai, where they had settled after managing to escape the coal mines in the Urals. Mulka found them in a worse state than ours in Namangan. He encouraged the two of them, left them a little money (by selling which of his possessions?) and shared with them the information about Afghanistan.

From a letter written by Rozit at the end of February, 1942:

... And now about Isaac. He is still in the hospital ... On the 21st of this month, he was hospitalized with a temperature of 35.6 degrees [96.08 F]! His face was very swollen, from hunger. For a week they fed him, more or less, and he was supposed to be coming out already, when his temperature suddenly shot up to 40.3 [104.54 F] and stayed that way for 8 days. I was sure it was typhus, but that was wrong—it's something abdominal. They gave him special food, toast with a light soup, and his face swelled up again. Now he is very weak, but very slowly he is coming back to us and in another few days they will discharge him, apparently ...

Another of the letters provided more specifics, as recorded by Rozit:

... In the evening, his fever went up to 40.2 degrees ... His appetite—nothing. And afterwards—41.5! ... It was the longest night of my life ... I stayed at the hospital all night.

When Isaac's fever went even higher and he began feeling "terrible pains in his back" and spitting blood, he was hospitalized. The diagnosis was severe pneumonia.

The letter was replete with details about the disease. Somehow it's not surprising that, years later, Rozit successfully passed his examinations for a degree in medicine from the Hebrew University.

And there was another letter—in Hebrew—from Isaac, lying on a bench in the hospital and anxious about the next day, when he would be asked to leave this refuge:

Our hope was for Mulka's speedy return and our departure to a place where the sun rises with a clearer light ... Nu, I'll stop here for now. And in spite of everything—don't despair! I mean that for myself and for you! Don't let your spirits fail—H.V.. [hazak v'amatz]

We were still *Shomrim*—still in the Movement.

Just how hungry those two and we were is clear in a letter Rozit wrote to me about six weeks later:

H.V. I understand your disappointment at our long silence. The truth is that I already wrote you two letters but at Isaac's suggestion, I did not send them—"too sentimental, missing important information" he said, and he was right. The other reason for the silence—the lack of 30 kopeks for the stamps ... I must ask your pardon if you have to pay the postage on this letter. Our situation is critical with no way out. Isaac had a relapse and is back in the hospital. Judging by your description of your pain, you two could appear as a duo ... This is the result of not eating. He was taken to the hospital after the third attack ... He was unconscious for about thirty minutes. In the hospital he is suffering terrible hunger. I am in despair and don't know if he will survive this. There is no way to help him. Just between us, Mulka's return without material assistance won't help him because he is unable to make any sort of effort.

The reference was, of course, to the effort involved in trying to cross the border on foot and walk until reaching a community on the other side.

Rozit was drafted. Isaac was left alone. In his solitude, he was comforted by the letters he received from us:

... After Rozit left, which affected my spirits overall, I felt almost like new blood was flowing in my veins, with a new urge to go on living, to struggle on. When I read what you wrote, I felt as if I were somewhere doing Histadrut work [manual labor] under difficult conditions, but that somewhere nearby there was a branch [of the Movement], our guys, guys I am close to; what a feeling of warmth enveloped me! I'm not alone! There are close friends around! The tone of your letter so reminded me of the old familiar atmosphere! For a moment it almost seemed as though nothing had changed ...

This, from someone who criticized his buddy's letters as "too sentimental, missing important information ..."

And from September 28, 1942, a few words:

Forgive me for not concluding yet. A sudden notice [from the recruiting office] that [I must report] today, at three o'clock! I am writing this from the train station on my way to Uchkurgan [a small local town]. I

*hope to meet up with Rozit. Maybe with you, in Tashkent.
Be well. —Isaac.*

The Afghanistan plan was not technically feasible, even if the “smugglers” were not actually agents of the regime. The plan to have our family and friends stay in a border city full of spies, professional and amateur; going on foot for “something like thirty kilometers”; the Soviets’ actions within Afghanistan, as if it were Soviet territory; the “English consul” in Herat, who of course would be delighted to whisk us immediately to *Eretz Yisrael*; no access to transportation—all these combined, along with a thousand other obstacles, should have opened our eyes not just to the risk we were about to undertake ourselves but also the disaster we were about to inflict on our elderly parents and a child of three ... but evidently such is the power of fervent faith, blindly carrying away even rational people.

Likewise Mulka’s journey to Ruth should have served him as a warning.

After fleeing Latvia, Ruth and her son Grisha (Tzvi), at the time about six months old, had reached Zuyevka in the Kirov region—the heart of Russia. Via the elderly aunts in Moscow, an emergency address for the Yaffe family, Ruth had located Mulka in Namangan and begun corresponding with him. As she subsequently told it:

It was by then December of 1941. Mulka wrote that he would come to fetch me and the child. He had already sent word of his departure when Rudya, my husband, left the battles at the front at Kalinin and came to take me and the baby to where he was serving, at a military hospital. His leave was extremely short, but we waited for five days for Mulka and could not wait any longer. I left him a detailed letter and we departed for Bezhetsk, a few hundred kilometers north of Moscow. Mulka arrived the next day, found the letter and went back to the train station. Since we were crawling along in the special train for the medical service, Mulka managed to arrive ahead of us. We went to the little flat that Rudya had been allotted and found Mulka lying there, ill with hepatitis. My husband immediately had him transferred to the military hospital, where he was on staff. My brother spent about a month and a half in the hospital, completely exhausted from the illness and from hunger, because on the way he had saved his food to feed the new arrival, the baby. He knew how hard it was to obtain food at the front. Our situation was actually better than his appeared to be. Even after he left the hospital, Mulya was very weak and we asked him to stay awhile to get his strength up, but he was in a hurry.

He decided to go back to Asia because he believed that from there, he'd be able to cross somehow to Persia or Afghanistan and get to Palestine. He also told us about a lawyer, Shtivelman, who had promised to get him and his friends across the border. Of course he wanted us to go with him, but my husband could not get out of the army. At that time, Rudy was a captain and the director of a department of the hospital. We had problems initially—they did not believe us. We came from Latvia and they saw us as a “foreign element.” It took a long time until we finally proved ourselves to be loyal. My husband could not agree to desert. Grisha was about 6 or 7 months old. It was impossible. We decided that Mulka would go alone, and we would see ... When we could get out of here, we would go, too.

The hospital was near the front. Dr. Ostashinski, who worked with Rudy at the time, was also an agent of the NKVD, and it was he who suspected us of being a “foreign element.” Ordinary passenger trains were not getting through then. Only military ones. For anyone without a connection to the military, it was hard to get even a daily bread ration. The hunger was extreme, and my husband decided to get Mulka a military ID, as if he were still in the army, since after all, Mulya had been injured at the front. Mulya received an army ID that assured him of a daily bread ration and which also bore a statement that he had to go to Tashkent. I accompanied him to the train. My husband was at work. We sat for nearly an entire day by the railroad tracks and waited. This was in February or March 1942. In a sack I had sewn for him, I put as much food as I could for his long journey. We sat and talked about the future and the possibility of escaping from Russia. Finally the train arrived, loaded the wounded, and Mulka departed. I went home, weeping. The next day some man brought a note from Mulka. On the note it said that he had been arrested and was at the police station in Bezhetsk, and that if I went there, I could see him through the window. I was terribly alarmed. We knew we had done something illegal. We had forged details on an identification document. I took the child in my arms and set out, as if I were going to the pediatrician. I walked slowly up the road where the police station was. This was a temporary jail they had set up in an empty shop, and through the window I could see the prisoners sitting on benches. I did not see him. People around me were taking notice. I went past again and Mulka threw a note out the window. I was afraid, but I picked up the note and ran home. Indeed, Dr. Ostashinski and a security agent from the hospital had come up to Mulka immediately after the train got underway, checked his documents and arrested him.

Mulka asked if I could bring him a little money to that window. When I went back to the window they had already taken him away. We were afraid. What would happen to Mulka, and what would happen to Rudya, who had forged the document and aided a criminal?

Meanwhile they transferred Mulka to the prison at Valdai, which housed state criminals, generals who had transgressed, and various other “traitors.”

The interrogation, according to Mulka, was harsh. The atmosphere in the prison nearest to the front was extremely tense. Human life was of no great moment; the “legal process” was swift and superficial. Mulka was accused—no more and no less—of “treason against the homeland”: The soldier Yaffe had run away from the front, had served the enemy in capitalist Latvia, knew foreign languages, including German, had studied in an art school ... There was enough for a conviction for espionage.

Mulka did not hold out much hope as to his ability to persuade the interrogator ...

The interrogator knew what to ask. His questions were precisely targeted and any attempt to get smart or confuse him would not go far.

Mulka told the truth, only the truth, but not the whole truth. The Shtivelman affair and all the related information about trying to break out and get to Palestine was missing from his confession.

During the interrogation, some of the questions were nit-picking: Which shops are known to him on such and such a street in Riga, which alley leads out of some other street, at which army base was he checked before his release from military service and who was in charge of the night school course ...

Why all that? When would the sentence finally be pronounced? Why were they postponing it?

The days went by, with no change. Then suddenly he was again taken out of his cell to the interrogation room.

“You are fortunate, Samuel Lazarevich, you are fortunate that I come from Latvia, and that you did not lie. I learned that you tell the truth. You are not a spy. You did not come here to collect information for the enemy. Take your documents and get lost. You are lucky ... The front is quite near, you know ... When we have any doubt about a suspect ... the front is quite near ...”

During this, his second time in Tashkent, Mulka renewed his ties in the city, registered for the Faculty of Hydrological Construction at the Engineering Institute, and on that basis obtained the right to receive bread ration coupons and a place to live in the student dormitories and of course also the right to stay in Tashkent with a permanent *propiska*.

Since the matter of the crossing to Afghanistan was now at the stage of final

preparations—or anyway, that’s what we thought—Mulka asked me to come to Tashkent. Two would be better than one.

To get a train ticket, I repeated the “Sverdlovsk maneuver,” but this time I had an official invitation from the Leningrad Conservatory, promising me a continuation of my studies. I did not think about the piano much—my head couldn’t handle more than the Afghanistan matter—but I had excellent “cover” as a legal citizen of Tashkent.

When I descended from the train, there was Mulka; he looked at my face, which was thinner after the bout with typhus, and blurted: “I’ll have to get organized to work in a restaurant.” Food! That was what I needed most of all. And indeed, about a week or two later, Mulka began working half the night shift (students could work half-time) in an officers’ restaurant. Mulka himself ate at this restaurant for a week, and in the tin containers he took with him, he would bring whatever came to hand—noodles, barley, sometimes rice, a bit of oil and so forth. That way, he could eat next to nothing of his bread ration, while I would wolf down nearly a double ration straight from the container. Unless you have had typhus during a famine, you cannot know what bread really tastes like, even if only rationed bread, full of substitutes and only half baked (which was done to make it weigh more, so that money could be made by selling the “overages” on the black market).

In Mulka’s student dormitory, the administrators all got used to seeing my face—it never crossed their minds that I was not one of “their” students, forbidden to cross their threshold without a permit. Mulka’s roommates played along. They were wonderful! And Mulka, who was working nights, let me sleep in his empty bed.

From the students who were our friends and roommates in the dormitory at 25 Proletarskaya Street in the Jewish quarter of Tashkent, we learned a lot. These were students from the Kiev Polytechnic Institute, who had been evacuated from their conquered city and were continuing their studies in Tashkent. Most of them were Jews—saved, by their evacuation, from the trenches of Babi Yar. They were considered “reserve” conscripts until they finished studying; at the end of their fifth year, they would be sent to the front as officers in a technical corps, or else to security units.

This was a social milieu after our own hearts, and it took us in as if we’d always belonged. Our non-Soviet origins did not bother these *Komsomol* youth; and we, notwithstanding the rules of confidentiality, talked among ourselves in Hebrew and flaunted our uniqueness, and they certainly had no doubt as to our true feelings. They also knew that we were corresponding with friends and relatives in *Eretz Yisrael*.

We spent about two years in their company, and the atmosphere was warm

and friendly. Through them, we became acquainted with the bitter Soviet humor and learned the students' slang, the secrets of Soviet *protektsia* (personal connections), and "how to live."

Through the grapevine, we heard from these youths about the atrocities of the 1930s: how the father of one young man was "taken away" and did not return; how someone else's mother had traveled to the far north to see her husband who was imprisoned there, but was then permitted—after lengthy pleading—to catch only the barest glimpse of him from a hilltop as he passed by in a group of hundreds of tattered prisoners, accompanied by soldiers with bayoneted rifles and panting guard dogs.

Sioma's mother visited the boarding school from time to time with his sister—Sioma was Simcha Remnik's nickname. Sioma, who later on became an engineer with the Israel Electric Company in Haifa, warned us: "My mother understands Hebrew; she learned it in childhood"—so we would not make the mistake of speaking in her presence one day, putting her in an awkward position unnecessarily ...

One of the lessons we learned was: Don't just talk less; don't listen, either.

The discussions with Shtivelman, with the "smugglers," with all the various *macherim* (wheeler dealers), continued. The sense of "tomorrow or the day after, we'll be on our way" was hard on our nerves. Meantime, another would-be traveler had arrived—Polya, one of the five young women who were with us during the evacuation from Riga. She had left four friends in the Urals, and we were afraid we would run out of time and have to leave before we could bring them all to Tashkent. Polya had been accepted as a student at the Textiles Institute—which guaranteed her a bread ration, a *propiska* and a bed in the dormitory.

I sat for hours on end in the municipal library or the university library—the only place in Tashkent I could sit at a table alone, and read a book or look at a map of the Soviet-Afghan border. I would measure, for the *n*th time, the distance between Soviet Termez and Mazari Sharif in Afghanistan. Hallucinating, I would imagine I saw the paths through the mountains and the fords across the rivers; I pored over encyclopedias, looking for places to sleep in the mountains and learning about the tribes we would encounter along the way.

I was subject to daydreams: dreams about a loaf of bread in Herat, about porridge and soup in Kabul; a dream about a clean bathhouse, about a dentist pulling a painful tooth; about a journey through the desert to Palestine ...

The dream vanished on Pushkin Street in the center of the city, when I saw the two "smugglers" exiting the headquarters of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Republic and continuing on their way past the main post office. They did not see me.

We cut off all contact with them and with Shtivelman.

Why do I waste time trying to figure out how come we were not imprisoned

in Tashkent, since we had certainly been reported? And later on, during my interrogation, I found out that we had indeed been reported.

The fact is, they did not arrest us. Perhaps they did not want to blow the cover on their agents?

We began to gather our friends in Tashkent. Polya's friends arrived, one by one, posing as students, from a little town in the Urals; Tsila, Bila and the sisters Leah and Sima, all members of training groups in Latvia before the arrival of the Soviets. Isaac, having been wounded in battle and declared unfit for further military service, hurried to join us. A bit later on, another few friends arrived from the front and from other places where the evacuation to the east had scattered them—including Rafael (Foljka) Lifshitz with his wife Rivka and their friend David Cohen and his wife Hannah. Other friends serving in the army would make their way to us during official missions or while on leave. Bringing my family to Tashkent from Namangan proved very difficult. In the process, we had a fine example of Mulka's talents for networking with important bureaucrats and mesmerizing their secretaries, and for negotiating with Jews who were more, or less, kosher. Finally they were legally registered - inscribed in the book of life in the capital city of Tashkent.

Our friends needed a roof over their heads and a bread ration. I found work as a night watchman in a restaurant, and I would bring leftovers for my friends, especially the women, who came at night to collect this bounty. Isaac also discovered a talent for guarding at night, at a food warehouse. My parents and our female students became adept at bartering. We learned how to get by.

The hunger and the privation bestowed moral authority on a way of life we would have condemned in normal times. The problem of earning a living, of providing food on a daily basis for the members of our collective, wore us all down. Sometimes there was simply no solution, meaning that one lay down on a mattress on the floor, stomach empty and hurting. In the chill of winter, when there was nothing to put in the stove (after all the wood fences had already been taken apart), and in the burning heat of summer when we could not stop worrying about our friends at the front, especially when their letters were delayed: the heart refused to believe that so-and-so was no longer among the living, amid the gnawing anxiety about what was happening beyond the German border at the front ...

Life was so packed with tragic events that sometimes it seemed as if our senses were dulled in a way that prevented us from apprehending the significance of what was taking place around us. I see before me a young woman whose family remained in the hands of the hated enemy and whose husband was killed at the front—walking along in the street, weeping, chewing on a dry crust of bread and telling my sister, whom she happened to meet passing by: "I've lost my mind, don't you think? I'm coming from the hospital. They told me that my little girl has died, but I can't stop chewing, I'm hungry ..."

After we had lost nearly all hope of finding Gamli, we discovered on the table of incoming mail at the dormitory two envelopes addressed to Mulka. The postal stamp showed that they had come from the Urals.

12 June 1943

Shalom Mulka! This is the second letter I am writing to you. I found out your address in Namangan from the clearinghouse for addresses in Kirov, and I wrote to you there. Now I've been given your correct address. Mulka, it's almost two years since we parted. A lot has happened in the interim, not that it has given us all that much. I'll fill you in briefly ... After you went to look for a connection [on the battlefield] they moved us to a first aid station: and then to Tallinn, where I spent about four days in the hospital, and from there to Leningrad, and after that to Sverdlovsk. I went from one hospital to another for almost 11 months but came out whole. As an exiled Latvian I was released from the draft, and since April have been working in a military factory in Kopeysk. Yes, the winter was not easy. It's pointless to talk about that, and I'm sure that you have been through some hard times too, so you can imagine.

... In April, I left Kopeysk and went to Troitsk to study at the agricultural technical school. I was there about two weeks ... The economic situation was hard ... I managed to find work in a factory—at least I wasn't starving. During that period, I was almost sent to the army. I was exempt on account of visual impairment, but since I was out of contact with everyone it didn't make much difference when the medical committee decided that I should go back to the army as a non-combat soldier. I already had orders to report. The factory management got it cancelled. Now, after receiving the letter confirming that you are alive, the situation is different. I will try to come to Tashkent. I hope I succeed ...

Shalom Yaka! I understand that you are continuing with your music at Tashkent ... The two last years are a void in my life, with nothing whatever accomplished, other than being alive and healthy, and maybe that is the biggest achievement in times like these ... Write! Every letter is a holiday for me ...

After a lot of effort—when Mulka was able to obtain student status for Gamli and an official request was sent, he came to us at Tashkent and joined our commune as the only one—if I'm not mistaken—who studied “seriously.”

Our commune was an absolute and unusual partnership that went far beyond worrying about our material existence. We sought and found comrades who had

fought at the front and sometimes even were able to help them somehow; and vice versa—in the breaks between battles or in the hospital after someone was wounded, they tried to help us, even sending a bit of scarce soap.

There were memorable, complicated campaigns to bring aid or rescue. A woman friend of ours in another city fell into a trap set for her by the local security services and was in complete despair. When we heard about it, Mulka hurried over there and extricated her, hid her at a remote *kolkhoz* and after things settled down a little, brought her to Tashkent, where our young women took care of her until she was recovered physically and emotionally. Only someone with experience with the Soviet regime could manage the kind of thinking, initiative and daring required to snatch the bleeding prey from the very jaws of that omnipotent network.

Corresponding with our people at the front, or wherever they had landed after the confusion of evacuation following the German invasion, was a full time job in and of itself for us all. We saw ourselves as the core group of the movement, whose few members had scattered to the farthest reaches of a hostile country.

Our material situation became more stable and even improved somewhat over time. We were able to make contact with Palestine, and along with the brief letters that warmed our hearts and gave us hope, we received tangible support in the form of care packages with food and other necessities from the Jewish Agency headquarters in Teheran. The commune's cash reserves grew a little via the sale of much of the contents of these packages on the black market, but we were able at last to replace some of the worn-out clothing we'd been wearing since fleeing our homes. Life was teaching us lessons—some of us more, some less—about how to behave under changed circumstances. We were not all endowed with “commercial” talents, but everyone contributed in some way to the treasury, which was communal, of course.

The commune members were very affectionate toward my elderly parents and their grandchild, my sister's son. More than once, my mother would appeal aggrievedly to the Master of the Universe: “Ha! If only God would treat me the same way people do ...”

Here it is worth noting that, at around that time, former members of the pioneering movements in Poland were coming together in communal groups in Tashkent and in various other places, too, but we knew nothing of this and did not find out until just before leaving the city. In hindsight, it was just as well that we were not in touch, because it could not have helped get us to Palestine, at a time when organizing amongst ourselves would have been very difficult and also dangerous. It would have been much easier for the security services to uncover secret activities of a larger group. But the fact that we knew absolutely nothing of these other communes and did not encounter their members clearly

testifies to the atomization of Soviet society, which was unable to develop any sort of social activity outside the establishment frameworks—even among people as close to each other as members of communes of the pioneering movements, even though we lived in the same city: we had no mutual connection and we did not meet.

Separate people, study them, divide and conquer—this was the approach of the Soviet regime—and they were more successful in applying it than any other regime on earth.

Our family moved to a small flat in the city center, and in time this became the headquarters of the commune. We acquired this asset thanks to our elderly friend Zalman Shalit, one of ten offspring—six sons and four daughters—of Shlomo Shalit, the founder of an empire of wood merchants in the days of the Tsar. This family, once known for its wealth and its involvement in the public affairs of Russian Jewry, went westward after the revolution, but retained commercial ties to the Tsar's heirs. In Latvia, too, the family members dealt in commercial forestry, and even permitted a pioneer training site to be set up at their farm.

Zalman Shalit came to Riga and settled there with his family after he was forced to flee Nazi Germany. The “Soviet” year in Riga went well for him, and even during the wave of arrests across the country just before war broke out, he suffered no harm, whether thanks to the commercial dealings the Soviets had with his family or simply to the administrative clumsiness to which even their security services were not immune.

Zalman Shalit's family were not inclined to leave Riga when war broke out, as they were under no suspicion of being supporters of Bolshevism, and they counted on their international connections to protect them, evidence of how naïve the Jews were concerning the intentions of the Nazis—but Zalman Shalit himself decided to leave for parts east, since the Nazis had a personal score to settle with him, following his earlier flight from Germany. This old man, who lived with us in Tashkent for more than two years, believed for a long time that when the war ended he would find all the members of his large family safe and sound. But the information that made its way to the newspapers and was passed along by word of mouth about what the Nazis were doing sapped his emotional strength and dimmed his hopes as the end of the war approached. When he returned to Riga, he found no remnant.

In Tashkent, Shalit and Mulka became acquainted and immediately became fast friends, and Shalit quickly made Mulka a part of his public dealings. Among other projects pursued by this amazing and courageous activist, who did not know the meaning of fear, was sending packages to Jewish prisoners in the forced labor camps, an activity that required time and effort, both physical and organizational, to purchase food, pack it properly in boxes (which were hard to come

by), fill out the forms, and stand in line at the post offices. To make the process easier on the old man, we undertook to participate in this project. Zalman Shalit knew, of course, what the commune members wanted, and he, too, aspired to reach Palestine. He rented a room in the city center from a woman with Latvian roots who had migrated from her homeland in 1917 with her husband, before Latvia declared its independence. Her house and an additional small building in her yard provided a bit of quiet serenity in the insane world of Tashkent, a city of immigrants in distress. Our meager little house there served as the center of the commune until Shalit's departure from the city in 1945.

The lonely Shalit found in us a group of energetic young people, and in my parents, contemporaries who were able to create, in a situation of double exile, a Jewish family atmosphere that eased his loneliness considerably. He was, of course, an object of interest to the Soviet secret services, who had apparently been instructed by higher-ups not to touch him—for the present—as his connections with the external world were too extensive (he corresponded with people in England, the United States, Palestine, etc.) and he even had friends in the West, people whom the Soviets could not permit themselves to dismiss in the middle of a war. But they were inclined to harass him—they would interrogate him for long hours, transporting him from Tashkent to some other city when some senior official of the United States was visiting that city, and so forth.

For his own upkeep and for his philanthropic activities, Zalman Shalit needed funds. He borrowed money from Polish émigrés who had made money in their various and sundry ways. The latter knew that there was a reasonable chance that at the end of the war they would return to Poland and would be able to go on from there, and they were willing to turn over substantial sums—which if discovered in their possession would have caused them a lot of trouble—to a man like Shalit, whom they trusted to repay them when they reached a safe haven.

Under these circumstances, Zalman Shalit was a kind of bank and welfare agency rolled into one.



Kopel Skop was my elder by five or six years. As someone who had been “stuck” due to the lack of immigration certificates, he had done a few years’ training at hachshara, and had even served in the Latvian army. Talking with him could transport you to another world, a world that did not yet exist, but well known from literature and from the stories told by your mother and father. Kopel’s Hebrew sometimes lapsed into Yiddish spiced with Russian and Polish words, with a Belorussian pronunciation, and when talking of his army service he was unable to refrain from swearing colorfully in barracks Latvian. This sort of low hybrid language was customary among the Jews of his city of Kraslava, or as

it is known by its Yiddish name, Kreslavka: a miniature metropolis, an international potpourri—Slavic, Lithuanian-Latvian, and Semitic—near the Soviet border.

... At home we spoke Yiddish, of course, but since we relocated when I was an infant during the First World War to Russia, I also knew Russian. Moreover my father sent me to a Latvian school, of all things. Why all of a sudden Latvian, you ask? Because the Yiddish school educated you to be anti-Zionist, as the Bund people were strongly anti-Zionist, and my father disagreed with the views of the Bund. At the end of the 1920s, we saw the rise of the Gordonia and Bar Kochba movements, which eventually became Hashomer Hatzair, and the Borokhov Youth, which was a kind of reserve force of the Socialist Zionist party, and a branch of Hechalutz, of course, and there were even Betar people in the city ...

Our mayor was a Jew, and half the town's six thousand citizens were Jewish.

—You were born in Kreslavka?

—No. I was born in Fidruya, a kind of suburb of Druya, but after Latvia became independent, the Polish border divided Druya from Fidruya.

The stories of Sholom Aleichem ...

— I am willing to talk about my town, about Kreslavka, as much as you want, because I loved and still love the Jews of the town—the man with the wagon and the town psycho and the rabbi, and also, for something different, the butcher ... What lively lives we led in our town! There were endless political arguments, both prearranged and spontaneous. The folksfarzamlungen [people's gatherings] attracted many people and we would prepare for these, for the argument that would break out ... To this little town came visitors from the leadership of the parties. We would argue there with Jabotinsky and with the Bund leader Doctor Maisel and with Chaim Zhitlovsky and with the Zionist Left's man in Latvia, Professor Lazerson ... With whom did we not debate! There was an atmosphere of respect for them, but we argued. We made no concessions to them ... The teachers! The teacher was "somebody" in the town. The doctor, likewise, did not confine himself to medicine ... and the various philanthropic institutions ... and if someone lost his property, they did not let him sink into the mud ... or an orphan who had lost everything ...

No, I am not portraying something that did not exist ... And

maybe ... maybe I am relating all this because they were such dedicated Jews, so thoroughly imbued with Judaism ...

When I was sent to set up a branch of Hashomer Hatzair in Fidruya, there were three households there who made sure I had bed and board and had no worries about where to live and what to eat. And it was that way in Daagdeh, and it doesn't matter that Daagdeh was a stronghold of the Revisionists and that Betar was very strong there ...

In our branch of Hashomer Hatzair in Kreslavka, there were 70 or 80 members. I was the oldest. In '34, I went for training. My sister had already made aliya to Palestine and was a member of Kibbutz Mishmarot, but she died before the war ... At hachshara, I was in "Kibbutz Hasolel." From there I was sent back to my town to strengthen the branch there, and then I returned to hachshara—this time to an agricultural one. The problem of the certificates was tough, and when my turn came—I went to the army. A certificate had already been found for me once, but there was a catastrophe in my family and I postponed my aliya ... And so I am sitting here with you in Tashkent, instead of where I am supposed to be ...

This is what Kopel reported, having come to us from distant Kyrgyzstan ...

When the Soviets took over Latvia, I managed all right working in a textile plant. When war broke out and the German army invaded the Baltic countries, we found ourselves, a group of movement graduates, on a train full of refugees that brought us to the kolkhozy around Yaroslavl. From there, we fled south from the menace of winter, from the hunger, and got closer to the Persian border, to Palestine. We passed Gorky and from there, in a boat on the Volga, got to Astrakhan and from there eastward to Uzbekistan, and then to Kirghizia, to the Tien Shan Mountains on the border of China.

The sealed border did not frighten Kopel. A sealed border can also be breached. But how to overcome the Gobi desert? Even the bureaucrats in the Chinese government who were supposed to cross this desert preferred to go around it and enter the Soviet Union at one end and return to their country at the other, just so that they did not have to risk crossing it.

Kopel was drafted and sent to a work detail that dealt with providing wood for the army's needs. In time, he rose in rank and worked on bookkeeping, and was even sent to Tashkent to set some things in order.

Polya met him at an electrician's in Tashkent, and now he is with us.

Kopel told us that, on one of his official trips to Frunze, capital of Kirghizia, he met a young woman from Latvia who was in the movement, and she put him in touch with Jews from Poland, among them Yehoshua Frankfurter and Yosef Neiman, also Zionists. These young men told him about their plans (mostly nonsense at that point) to go back to Poland at the end of the war and from there go on to Palestine. Thus it was best for Kopel to be from Poland. Kopel sought our opinion, and of course we supported him in this plan: When the time was ripe, he would join the Polish gar'in and travel to Lvov, where by some ruse he would get a travel permit to Poland, and would go on to Palestine.

And the main thing was that, in Lvov, he could determine what could be done for us.

The difficult life, the fear of what tomorrow would bring, the problem of earning a living, hearing about loved ones who'd been lost, the rumors of the atrocities discovered in territory liberated from the German army—nothing could erase our sense that we were caught in a depressing routine and being dragged along in the wake of events.

It was clear that the future would not materialize as we had imagined. The refugees, most of them Jewish, dreamed of returning to their homes. A great many imagined that, very soon after the end of the war, everything would go back to the way it had been and that the terrors of war would become only a bitter memory.

With us it was otherwise. Return home? Come to terms with life in the Soviet reality?

It was clear to us that even if the Communist regime loosened the reins somewhat, we would not benefit. Our problem would not be resolved. Those who hoped that, following a crushing victory over the enemy—a victory to be attained in partnership with the democratic West and with its help—positive changes would come about in the Soviet regime, a speck of free speech would be promised, a more liberal economic policy be adopted (maybe even propelled by the current economic hardships), an amnesty of some kind be declared for political prisoners—even they did not dream of the right to emigrate from the Soviet Union, no matter how important that right was in the scale of values of the peoples of that state.

A logical and merciless analysis suggested that the way to Palestine would remain blocked.

Who would help us? “The rescue of those drowning in deep water is up to the ones who are doing the drowning,” in the words of Ilf and Petrov, the famous satirists from Odessa.

There were two possible directions we needed to examine.

The Polish refugees spoke seriously about repatriation to their homeland, as

ostensibly promised to them. We had no idea about how the authorities might carry out such a thing, but it seemed reasonable that women citizens of the Soviet Union who had married former Polish citizens during the war, would be permitted to leave the country with their husbands and children. If so, we could solve the problem of how our five young women could leave, by finding them Polish refugee “husbands.” But this dubious stratagem offered no hope for the unmarried lads among us and for my family, and there was no certainty in any case that Jews would then be allowed to emigrate from Poland.

The other possibility was not only dubious but also dangerous: to check in Riga, after it was liberated from the German occupation, about fleeing from there to Sweden—and if not from Riga, perhaps from some other place on the Baltic Sea.

The gray existence of waiting to see what the next day would bring began to be insufferable for Mulka. I sensed that very clearly.

His two aged aunts, meanwhile, were living in Moscow. They had experienced the hell of Moscow in the days of the October revolution, and the subsequent rampant terror and starvation and all the other horrors wrought on its citizens by the new regime.

He thus had a kind of base in Moscow.

Mulka was twice enlisted—thanks to connections with nimble “friends”—to ride with the armed guard on the trains loaded with vehicles and equipment that were transported periodically from Tashkent to Moscow. If one knew what was worth buying in Tashkent, and what to exchange it for on the way so as to sell that in Moscow—and return, heaven help us, in the other direction—one could profit very nicely from a commercial journey like that. To pull it off, of course, one had to avoid all the pitfalls on the way and manage not to be jailed for profiteering. It wasn’t the anticipated material profit but rather the boredom of routine, the desire to sniff out what was going on in Moscow, to see which way the wind was blowing and how things would turn out with the war’s end—that was what drove Mulka to make the journey. He did one round trip, Tashkent-Moscow-Tashkent, and then another, and afterwards came to the conclusion that as the war drew to an end, he ought to be closer to the center of things. His plan was to go and live in Moscow with his aunts, who he presumed would welcome him with open arms, to continue his studies there at the Moscow Institute of Engineering and thereby be assured of a *propiska* and a bread ration. Everything else would work itself out, since he already had a wealth of experience in how to get by in the Soviet reality.

Mulka departed, feeling that he was embarking on a mission, but I was very worried. My egotism whispered that it was better for him to stay with us; that as long as we were working together, the two of us, things were more likely to work

out well. It was not easy for him to leave us and parting from him was not easy, particularly since letters from Moscow took a long time to reach Tashkent, assuming they arrived at all rather than landing in a censor's drawer somewhere. Mulka's uprooting to Moscow meant that we would be severely cut off from each other; nonetheless, we believed that he would find a way to get news to us, somehow.

As always, we discussed what we would do under various circumstances that might arise. Given the censorship exercised over every letter posted, we had to devise a reliable code. We invented a sophisticated system of coded correspondence, which worked right to the end. Preparing one of these letters demanded great concentration, but our secrets were safe. We also organized an ordinary sort of code, as many enthusiasts did, without any special sophistication, for instances when not much secrecy was necessary.

During that period I was unable to shake off an uneasy feeling about this enterprise of ours, two adults playing children's games that rightfully belonged in a cheap detective novel.

We accompanied Mulka on his departure to Moscow. The parting by the railroad tracks was hard for all of us. He was like a son to my parents. His concern and care for them was a great comfort and compensation to them for all the suffering and grief they had endured after my brother and my brother-in-law fell in battle.

Tzila's parting from Mulka is engraved in my memory. Her husband Eli had died in combat, but at the time her friends were concealing from her the letter from the Ministry of Defense in Moscow that bore the bitter news. Correspondence from the front lines was unreliable and there always remained a spark of hope that one's beloved was not writing because he had been wounded, or captured (we did not yet know what the Nazis did to Soviet prisoners, especially the Jewish ones).

Tzila went over to Mulka, kissed him goodbye and asked him to see what he could learn about her Eli at the Ministry of Defense offices in Moscow.

We did not know where to look.

Because the "Lvov plan," which Kopel was supposed to see about carrying out when he got there, was still nonsense, we began looking out for "grooms" for our young women. If this had not been the Soviet Union, we would have gone to a marriage broker or published an ad saying something like: "Seeking five Jewish bachelors aged twenty plus, Polish refugees planning to return there, who for a fee or for Zionist reasons or purely ulterior motives are willing to register in the Marriage Bureau with Jewish girls from a good home and take them to Poland," and perhaps we would have added, to make sure, "and to divorce there on the request of either party."

Perhaps if we had known of the existence of a commune of pioneering youth

movement refugees from Poland, with some extra young men, we might have solved the problem very simply via the approach taken by *Hechalutz* before the war broke out: they used to organize temporary, arranged marriages for every male candidate for *aliya* who obtained a certificate, with female members chosen by seniority in training (helped perhaps by their movement affiliation)—anything so as not to lose the chance to get one more person to Palestine.

In hindsight, we should have talked to the unaffiliated Polish refugees, whom we stereotyped as greedy profiteers, assuming that they were interested only in horse-trading. Although we did encounter some people of that sort, they turned out to be the exception. The “non-organized” Jewish refugees proved not to be scoundrels, and some were not in the least materialistic. The difficulty we had in our contacts with Polish refugees was very different, and arose from the constraints of Jewish demography in the wake of the Holocaust: From Poland came news of a lack of Jewish brides; a man who did not want to remain a bachelor or to marry a Polish rape victim, would come “equipped” with a Jewish woman from Russia. After checking the “goods” offered, the “buyers” would generally agree and even waive payment in exchange for their readiness to marry, but they wanted authentic marriages ...

Hence our marriage brokering hit a snag at times by giving rise to authentic courting by the bachelor in question, halting the process entirely. Meantime the war had not yet ended, and repatriation still seemed a long way off, and there seemed no need to force the matter at that point.

In October 1944, Riga was liberated from Nazi occupation. Mulka set off there within a few days. The journey from Moscow to Riga was not a simple undertaking. The city was under Soviet military rule. The besieged forces of the Reich and Latvian Fascist resistance units were waging rear-guard actions in the Kurland enclave.

Mulka needed a travel permit from the military or some other authorized entity. He went to NKVD headquarters and waved the documents with his pedigree under their noses—partisan, war wounded, student. Then he told them that just before the evacuation in 1941, when the enemy forces were about to enter the city, he had been working in the port and had carried out an order to bury the plans for its expansion, including many details classified as top secret. In his opinion, he said, it was important that these documents, the location of which he doubted was known to anyone else besides himself, should not fall—accidentally or intentionally—into unauthorized hands.

Mulka understood the hearts of these guardians of the regime. The danger that “classified documents” might fall into untrustworthy hands—after they, in their official capacity, had not acted with the requisite promptness ... Who would be prepared to be responsible for something like that, when it might end up costing him his head?

Bearing the travel document, duly signed—on which the signatures, one after another, embodied the highest official authority—Mulka immediately set out, stepping down from the railway carriage two days later in the city, with battles still raging nearby and the city itself under emergency rule.

But Riga, the city of his birth, where he had lived for twenty-two years, was now foreign to him. It was a Riga without Jews.

Mulka had come face to face with the Holocaust.

The details emerged and accumulated bit by bit—how the Latvians had tortured, abused, raped, humiliated, robbed, and murdered, even before they rounded the Jews up and squeezed them into the ghetto; how they had betrayed their friends and pounced on the plunder; how they had stood watching and even applauded the atrocities.

And at the start of the first winter—the death march to the Rumbuli Forest, with his mother and father among the marchers.

A few survivors came out of hiding, where the righteous few had hidden them; those wounded in battle were brought to the city's hospitals, among them some of our friends, bearing news of those who had fallen at the front.

The ruins in the city, which had largely been spared destruction, bore mute witness—the synagogue that had gone up in flames around the local Jews who had been herded inside; an empty lot where Jews had been rounded up to be taken away and executed; small ruined structures in a quiet suburb where they had tortured those brought from elsewhere in a conquered Europe; the Jewish cemetery, where there were already gravestones missing ...

The neighbors in the house where he had been born were disappointed and anxious at the reappearance of the “heir.”

Others returned: Ruth and her husband and their children, little Tzvi and Genya, still nursing ... Rudya, who had been demobilized and begun to work at the city hospital. By various means, he and Ruth were able to obtain an apartment underneath the one where they had lived until the war, which had been confiscated by the liberating army.

And then to Moscow, to bid farewell to the aunts—who would look after them now, poor things?—and to bid farewell to the friends he had made in the capital, and back to Riga.

In the mass confusion of those days, did anyone know what tomorrow might bring?

Mulka did not find the secret plans at the port, but there were contacts with the port workers. The mission was clear—to arrange a job at the port!

Many of the Jewish refugees who had gone through the war in the East, far from the killing fields, had a strong urge to return and experience the horror, say Kad-

dish at the edge of the pit, interrogate the close-mouthed neighbors, search for the remnants—property, a letter, a photograph ...

Some people did decide to settle in the place where they had put down roots during the war, but most wanted to return home, and some were after revenge, wishing to embitter the lives of the actual murderers and anyone else allied with them.

To be living in the city where you were born and raised, to walk its streets, familiar from childhood, and suspect every passer-by—and if not him then maybe his son or his father or his brother—as one of the murderers; to visualize your mother, your sister, your friend being seized at the entrance to your house and thrown to the cheering rabble outside; to feel the blows and kicks as if on your own body, to feel the bullets when they were dragged away unconscious, guarded by drunkards and barking dogs ... How could one go on living in this city?

Zalman Shalit decided to return from Tashkent to Riga. His departure from Tashkent was accompanied by an instructive incident.

During the war, the security services of the Uzbek Republic behaved with restraint. They had him followed and they investigated anyone who came into contact with him—and they awaited their window of opportunity, that moment when they would receive the order to arrest him. Now, with the war over and the importance of Western alliances waning, the time was ripe to settle accounts with this “capitalist shark” who was running about freely in Soviet territory.

About an hour after Zalman Shalit had left for the train station, where he was to board the Tashkent-Moscow train en route to Riga, agents of the secret services entered our front yard. The owner was away and they came to my mother asking whether Zalman Shalit lived there and seeking to know his whereabouts. These fellows don’t rush to identify themselves, but anyone who had acquired “Soviet smarts” would know immediately who they were and what they wanted.

Zalman Shalit was still in Tashkent. He had had to leave early for the station, before the engine was coupled to the carriages. Even if you already had in your possession the precious ticket and all the other documents required for the journey, there was still no way of being certain that the ticket agent would permit you to actually enter the carriage (where he may have promised or sold your seat to someone else), and if he did permit it—whether you would actually get a seat (for a journey lasting several days). If and when you got it, would your seat be next to the crowded aisle or alongside the window? Would you be able to rest at night on the upper berth? Would he agree to receive your baggage through the window before the announcement to enter the carriage—to save you having to contend with the excited crowd, merciless, trampling, no respecter of age, while you carried a bag stuffed to the limit, so that when you finally found yourself in the carriage, you would realize that of your precious baggage (in the packing of

which you invested most of your thought, efforts and money), what remained in your hand was merely the handle or perhaps the end of a rope ...

In short, it was necessary to leave two or three hours ahead of time to get everything fully clarified at the station, in plenty of time, regarding the people you had to persuade or bribe to make sure things would turn out well.

If my mother had answered the questions about Shalit by saying that he had left an hour or so ago on his way to Riga, the agents would have known that they ought to hurry to the station to change the old man's destination to, for example, Siberia. But my mother played innocent and explained to her guests that Comrade Shalit had gone out for an hour somewhere in the city, and had even said *au revoir*—*do svedanya*—in his usual fashion, and their best bet was to come back at five o'clock, the hour when he generally drank a glass of tea ...

One may well ask why the authorities in Uzbekistan did not inform their superiors in Moscow that the "big fish" had eluded the net and that it should be spread for him in Riga ... There is no straightforward answer: Perhaps they only wanted to interrogate him about something; perhaps they were postponing the arrest to some other time ("Where can he run to?"), perhaps they had decided that if he disappeared from their jurisdiction, there was no point in going looking for a reprimand from Moscow ("How did you manage to let this criminal slip through your fingers? Meanwhile, he has managed to cause tremendous damage to the state!").

In a well-oiled bureaucracy, people know that, above all, they must safeguard themselves against the criticism of those charged with overseeing their failures.

My sister travelled with her son to Riga. With the help of friends he'd found, Mulka had fabricated and sent to her in Tashkent a document from a government ministry, on the highest level, stating that this ministry had need of her. This was just the beginning of the family's reestablishment in Riga. After our parents returned there, they needed somewhere to live, of course, and by law, the apartment that had been my sister's before the war should have been returned to her without delay, but the current tenant was an agent of the security services whose office was adjacent to the flat. When two people both claim exclusive ownership of the same apartment, clearly possession is nine-tenths of the law, the more so when there is an agent of the regime involved. Protracted litigation was to no avail. But after the officer had won out completely, and not even the shadow of an apartment appeared on the horizon for my sister, the security agent summoned her and told her that he would relinquish the flat ... to her!

In vain, various experts on the secrets of deviant behavior by holders of Soviet sinecures in the emergent Communist era attempted to get to the bottom of this officer's act in picking himself up and walking out of a three-bedroom apartment with a dining room, kitchen, elevator, running water and central heating, in the

heart of the Latvian capital. My own inclination is to see it as simply what it appears to be, an act of generosity on the part of someone who empathized with refugees returning home to the city after years of wandering and of suffering; others reject this explanation, asserting moreover that I have not the slightest grasp of Kremlinology and that I think like someone from the 1930s ...

■ ■ ■

I stayed in Tashkent to help the girls and Gamli, whom we had long since discovered was Sima's life partner (then, and ever since then), to organize their departure to Poland via the fictitious marriage route. This naturally required money, and as it turned out, the negotiations with several candidates went on and on.

Then suddenly something happened.

In July of 1945, I got a letter from my sister in Riga, very vague as to wording, but the ink stains on the paper testified to her emotional state at the time of writing. At first it was hard for me to decipher the sense of this letter, but after decoding the euphemisms my sister had employed, I understood the gist: Mulka was no longer in the Soviet Union!

Max—that is, Mordechai Rosenkovich—and his wife Lyuba were relatives of my mother's. We have never been able to figure out exactly how we are related, other than the fact that it has always been unquestioned and that she and Mordechai-Max and my mother were born in the same town. As proof positive, it has always sufficed for me that the three very beautiful daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Rosenkovich were members of my own generation. Tanya, Raya and Miriam were all devoted *Betar* members, but this flaw was not enough to disrupt our relationship. The very difficult period of acute conflict between the two Zionist camps, which the murder of Chaim Arlosoroff greatly exacerbated, could have accounted for a certain distancing between these three and me, but I prefer to attribute it to the fact that Raya transferred to a different school.

Mulka and Raya loved each other even as children.

In preschool, what we called first grade, Raya insisted on sitting next to Mulka. At least, that's what she claims, but perhaps she made it up because of her feelings for him—which in itself says something. Personally, I would prefer not to swear one way or another about this; but given the private notes that went back and forth between the two of them in class as soon as we had learned to write, whether from hand to hand or delivered by a trusted messenger, and the continuation of the story on into our high school years, none of our surviving classmates from that era could deny the bond, and Raya herself says: "He was my first boyfriend; we were very close, but we separated for political reasons because he was *Hashomer Hatzair* and I was *Betar*."

Once upon a time, political loyalty was stronger than love.

Tanya, Raya's sister, made *aliya* to Palestine before the Soviets entered Latvia. Raya continued with her studies at university. When the war broke out, she was able to evacuate to the east. Her parents and her younger sister did not survive.

In the autumn of 1941, on my way to Tashkent, I met Raya in a railway carriage. She was headed for Shymkent in Kazakhstan, where she had friends. She hadn't a single penny to her name and her bread was all gone. I shared with her, of course, and suggested that she come with me, but when she heard details of my family's situation in Namangan, she was concerned about being a burden on us and went on as planned. The connection was not severed, however.

In her wanderings, Raya came through Tashkent once again, and that time we had her stay with us in the young men's dormitory at the Engineering Institute. This feat involved the cooperation of the seven boys from Kiev who shared our room, since regulations prohibited the hosting of strangers without a *propiska* and it was no trivial matter to flout the rules, much less to lodge a female in a room for males, may the Almighty protect us. But with the fellows looking the other way, I had tacit rights to Mulka's bed, while he worked nights at the restaurant, and the very strict guard viewed me, by this time, as just another student at the institute. I appropriated the long common table to sleep on, and the seven boys turned their faces to the wall as per my instructions so that our guest could get undressed and get into Mulka's empty bed. In the morning, the guys created a diversion for the guard, obliging him to leave his place and go into the next corridor to calm things down, while Raya meanwhile made her exit.

Scandal was avoided.

She got into the railway carriage by standing on Mulka's shoulders: Someone inside the carriage, perhaps a student like us, in a display of understanding and solidarity, and sensitivity toward the fair sex, opened the window for her.

When Raya returned to Riga at the end of the war, in the summer of 1945, she found that she had nothing to look for there, alone, other than a few pieces of jewelry her father had managed to hide for her before he left with his wife and their younger daughter on their last journey. She found a few friends through whom she met a non-Jewish Polish man whom the Germans had brought to Riga during the war to run a military sewing shop for them. Raya met him while looking for some *protektzia* to get a coat sewn for herself; without *protektzia*, she could not have found a tailor ... During their conversation at her final fitting, he innocently mentioned that he was returning to his homeland. Raya already knew that the man had provided Polish documents to her friends that enabled them to flee the Soviet Union. This sort of deal was made, when there was absolute trust between the two parties, for a payment of 20 gold rubles from the time of the Tsar. The risk was entirely with the holder of the forged document and the price of failure was at least ten years in prison and a forced labor camp.

The tailor told Raya that if she wanted to go to Poland with him, he could get her a document, but that she would have to make up her mind by the next day, and then he would give her more details.

I did not have a lot of confidence in him. I went out to the street wondering if I should risk a connection with this sort of person, who strikes me as an adventurer. But nonetheless he was Polish and he was going home, and I ... And the time for giving him an answer was so short ... With whom could I talk this over?

I walked along the noisy street, thinking about it, wracking my memory for a friend, acquaintance, anyone I could tell my secret to, and talk it over with. And suddenly there was Mulka, in front of me! A miracle! I was very confused, and so glad we had run into each other. He gave me his address, and then, impulsively, I decided to share my problem with him. The next morning I would have to go to this Pole and let him know my decision, so that same evening, I went to see Mulka at his sister's. Yankel Hefetz, the fellow who was wounded and released from the army, limping, was also there.

In Riga there was a curfew at night, which forced people to go home early, but we didn't pay much attention and continued to talk until dawn. When I first raised the idea with Mulka of my going with this Pole, his first reaction was negative, because Yaka had not yet arrived in Riga and he, Mulka, did not want to make a plan without him. I told him that there was no way. This was my last chance. There would be no more opportunities like this one. And then we decided that we would both go to see the Pole; I would go in to his apartment alone and tell him that I had someone else with me. But the next day, when I went in and told him that I had someone else with me, he said "Absolutely not. Without anyone else, please." I told him that we were two and wanted to go out together. He said okay, but the negotiating he would do with me alone, he said ...

The Pole told Raya something of his plans: Everyone who was going with him was Polish by birth. Only she and the person coming with her did not have the right to return to Poland. They would have to leave within two or three days. He asked her to pay 10 gold rubles (reducing the amount, for some reason), which he needed for expenses; he would have to pass the money on to someone who would prepare the documents required for the two of them. Raya wanted to postpone the decision and asked the Pole whether he could tell her somewhere she could turn to after he left, but he said there was no such place.

I asked him what would happen then? What about a passport? He replied that when they prepared passports for the others, they would prepare one for me and my companion too. I told him that I would come back in a few hours and he said that I could come the next morning. I just had to get the money ready and have fake names for the passports. He also asked that I find names that sounded Polish. He wasn't willing to explain any more, but added that he would be among those leaving. "We'll all be in the same boat," he concluded.

They spent the day talking it over at Ruth's house. She was not overly enthusiastic, but her husband Rudy was in favor of the plan: "If you expect the NKVD to send you passports with exit permits to Poland," he said, "I'm afraid you'll have to wait until the Messiah comes."

Zalman Shalit, who was living in Ruth's flat, was also let in on the secret of the planned journey and he went to the city in the morning to try to raise funds. Although Raya had the sum required, Zalman Shalit thought that money could never hurt. He himself was ready and willing to join the adventure, but the two argued: "If we get in a jam, that is one thing; but you, at your age ..." There was no further discussion of his joining the group.

As for Yankel, his disability was his downfall; he was disqualified, because there was a good possibility that they would have to go much of the way on foot.

We left at five in the morning. On the way we were stopped. They checked our documents and let us pass. We were supposed to reach a rendezvous, but when we got there, we found no one. The neighbors looked at us suspiciously and we left, uneasy. If we were arrested, they would discover that we had both Soviet identity cards and Polish ones. We decided to destroy the Soviet documents, come what may. We left them in a public toilet. Now I'm Polish, I said to myself; what's done is done. We had arrived at the building that was supposed to be the "punkt"—the rendezvous post. Mulka approached the punkt alone, and came back to say that there were no Poles there, but that there was an armed guard. We went into the building. A sergeant took our papers then announced that they were closing down post and he did not know when the train to the border would leave; perhaps tomorrow, and meanwhile we would have to make out as best we could there. All the rooms were empty of furniture. Finally "our" Polish tailor arrived. We were very relieved. The man told us that the rest of the "Poles" were as Polish as we were, i.e., Soviet citizens, but they at least spoke Polish. Finally they all arrived. I knew a few words of Polish, but I would get mixed up and something else would

slip out. We decided that it would be better to speak bad Russian and pretend to be Poles who just could not understand Russian no matter how hard they tried. We failed at that, too. "Where do you know such good Russian from?" marveled our new friends.

In the evening, the Poles decided to go to a party nearby. We had no interest in going, but our remaining at the punkt would have seemed suspicious, so we went. I almost fell down when I saw there two young men who should have known me because we had been at university together.

In the morning they told us that now the investigators would come to examine our documents, and then we would leave. I thought that perhaps someone among the examiners would know me, but for some reason they did not show up. An order was given to vacate the premises, because they had brought from the border Russians whom the Germans had expelled westward during the war, and now the occupying authorities were sending them home. An armed soldier appeared with a list of eleven persons and ordered us to board the train that was standing and waiting there.

I was listed as Irena Rozenska. I don't remember Mulka's phony name. I could be passed off as a Polish (Christian) woman: Mulka decided to remain a Jew—Polish, but a Jew. They closed the carriage doors, gave us bread and tea, and we departed. We rode along and arrived in the vicinity of Rovno. There were a lot of Poles there, each with a passport in hand. Only we did not have passports. When it was our turn, the Soviet clerk asked where our passports were, and "our" Pole told him that they did not give us any. The clerk gave him back the list and said, "Go back and bring the passports." Our guide from Riga insisted that they not send us back; there ensued an endless consultation and finally they detached our carriage from the train and we remained in some kind of border station, where they took us out of the railway carriage and we spent a rainy night sitting under its roof. We tried to sneak across the border, but "our" guy warned us not to be foolish—there were border guards in all the houses around. We were very tired. Finally they took us all to one of the houses, in exchange for payment. In the morning, we got to Rovno on foot. They took us to some kind of big camp that was full to bursting with people. In the evening they would call names off a list, and armed guards would take those people outside the camp. No one explained what was going on. We approached some of those leaving and asked where they were taking them. The answer was "ten years," "twelve years," and so forth ... In other words, the time they were sentenced to serve.

There were women and children there, too. Evidently these were Russians who had tried to flee to Poland, or to the West, or who had refused to return from the West to the Soviet Union.

When we entered that camp and approached one of the buildings, as a place to stay, we were shocked. People—men, women, children—were lying on the floor; everything was filthy, full of lice, with a fearful stench ... Our Pole demanded “special consideration” for us, citizens of Poland returning home, and finally they let us stay outside in the open air rather than go into those filthy buildings. Our Pole was very quick. By the next morning, he was sipping vodka with the major who commanded the camp. This major promised that “everything would be okay,” and that within a week or two, the passports would arrive and we would leave ... We understood that there were no passports and that passports would never arrive, but our Pole seemed to be in a good mood and said that within a week or two, things would change for the better, and meanwhile he suggested to the major that he sew him a suit, since anyhow he was currently out of work ...

The major accepted this suggestion, presaging a change for the better. We received permission to go in and out of the camp. I and the Pole worked at the house of this major. We measured him and began to sew. This was the first suit I had ever sewn, but the major praised our work and looked after us. No longer were we hungry.

One day, when I had stayed at the major’s house alone, I saw on the table questionnaires meant for people crossing the border, which the major had forgotten to take to work. I took one. Later I volunteered to sew a dress for his wife, too. One evening the major invited us to dinner. The Polish officers from the area were also invited. I was terrified. How would I talk to them? I don’t know any Polish! We made up a story about my having a lung disease and that it was better not to bother me, and our Pole played the role of lover very well, his sole desire being to bring his Irena to Poland while she was still alive. I begged pardon and said I did not feel well, and I got out of there.

The questions we found on the questionnaire I had stolen, Mulka and I learned by heart. Mulka decided that he would pretend to be a Jew who had managed to fool the Germans and thus had stayed alive; I would be a primitive Polish woman with only four years of elementary school ... Finally the day came that they called us to report to the committee. I was asked to go first. The first question they asked me was whether I knew Polish. I said yes. The examiner asked if I also knew Russian. I said that I did, and that if he preferred to

speak to me in Russian, I would speak Russian. I was able to produce the worst Russian I'd ever spoken. When I came out after about an hour and a half of interrogation, I was completely exhausted. I could hardly stand up. Mulka's turn also went well. That same evening I was still sewing something for the major's wife, and I gave her my wristwatch. She revealed that the committee had approved our crossing to Poland. We got documents for our passage and they let us go to the border post. We did not wait for the train. We went on foot. We were afraid that at the last minute some message would come, saying that we had never had passports.

We arrived at the Polish border post. We gave the sentries there money, and they let us board the Polish train. When we were already inside, a group of Soviet border guards entered the carriage and they wanted to throw us off the train. Everything went dark suddenly: their officer was Herbert Rubin, with whom I had once studied for my university entrance examinations! I thought that, even if he did not intend to ruin everything, it was only natural that he would ask about what I was doing there. I quickly removed Mulka's eyeglasses from his nose and put them on myself; I put on a large kerchief that partially hid my face, and I sat down. I couldn't see anything because of the glasses, and Mulka did not ask about my little performance. We were able to walk out of that carriage without incident, and when we approached another carriage, we went in. It was full to overflowing, and we each managed to find somewhere to stand, with only one foot on the floor. Each of us had a bottle of vodka in case we had to bribe someone. We were so nervous, we started to drink it.

Three days we stood that way. We arrived in Warsaw drunk.

The coincidence that Mulka was walking on that particular day at that particular time and on that particular street when Raya hurriedly left the apartment of the Polish tailor who had landed in Riga, of all places, during wartime; the coincidence that she happened to order a coat from this particular tailor, a coat that she really might have made herself; the coincidence that the tailor told her so openly of his plans because they knew someone in common ...

Coincidence ...

A really talented author of thrillers would have found a more believable way of arranging that Mulka and Raya be at the same place, at the same time, for a chance meeting. The coincidence so enthralling to kindergarteners does not seem innocent in the same way to anyone past the age of Bar Mitzvah ...

Yet, the very next day our author managed to piece together the continuation of this pitiful script: That same evening, his protagonists decide suddenly to un-

dertake something that has no chance of success—which should end with a brief interrogation by the security services and the prospect of ten years' imprisonment in an Arctic labor camp, and a beating to encourage the prisoner to reveal the names of his accomplices. A happy ending? The chances are almost nil.

Level-headed people, even if they are protagonists in a script, generally don't rush hastily to rescue an author from impasse. An experienced producer would have rejected such a simplistic film script, returned it to the embarrassed author and recommended that he try for a less pretentious version this time, or at least a more credible one.

Yet the author is right. His version is the truth. The reality was that the regime had collapsed at the end of a long and cruel war, and public order in the country had been shaky from the outset, even in more ordinary times; it was a country that had confusion in its blood. With such a surfeit of laws and rules and exceptions and so many edicts and regulations and instructions—covert and overt—even the officials themselves did not know what was permitted and what prohibited at any given time. Thus was the ground prepared for imaginative ideas with the power to foster impossible acts!

An enduring fact: it was pure chance that the *bricha* came about in this corner of Europe.

And the corollary: Only someone yearning for his chance with all his heart and all his might, only someone searching for it night and day, waking and sleeping—only someone like that would find that his chance had come, and even then it only happened sometimes, so when it did happen, one had to grasp the opportunity any which way and hang on for dear life.

I knew no details about Mulka's exit (in which direction? toward Sweden?). The letters did not talk about that, nor was it discussed at home—the walls may not have ears, but what about microphones?

The matters that had kept me in Tashkent were progressing. We had found a solution not just for the girls, but also for Gamli, if he would only take as wife a Polish émigré who was going home. The prospects seemed reasonable that things would work out, though of course there was no guarantee.

I had a mental list engraved in my memory of several dozen comrades, graduates of our movement, with whom I was still in touch. Many were still serving in the Soviet army; others had already returned to Riga; and still others were scattered far and wide around the globe. Each of them had to be contacted individually as to his future plans.

I went to Riga with a heavy heart. I left behind in Tashkent a group of friends with whom I had travelled a good part of the way, and if not a long road, it had certainly been a hard one. Together we had planned the crossing to Afghanistan, which had come to nothing; together we had been hungry; together we had

fought to assure the survival of every member of our little commune—and now we were going our separate ways and who knew whether we would ever meet again, or where.

They accompanied me to the railroad station and there we parted. For a great many years.

On the way, in Moscow, I needed to clarify what the situation was with Betya—or Betty, or Betka (so flexible, those Russians!), the widow of Yitzhak Gordon, who had been widely admired as the leader of our movement just before it disbanded. We all felt an obligation to extend help to her insofar as she might need it, but when I asked her in Moscow about her plans, she said that she was not thinking of returning to Latvia; she wished to continue her studies at the medical school in the capital, and the problem that was worrying her was to get a flat, or at least a room, to live in. My tales of the subversive exploits of her friends in Tashkent, her companions in the movement and in training, in their attempts to reach Poland on their way to Palestine, did not make her rethink her own plans. In Dvinsk (Daugavpils), the city where her parents lived and where they had been annihilated, she had inherited a house. She thought to sell this asset and “buy” a room in Moscow. Acquiring the right to live in Moscow was a very complicated feat, and I warned her that she might well be investing her money in a dubious venture, and that she ought to weigh every step carefully lest she be cheated.

In Riga, I found my parents, my sister and her son living in two rooms; the third room housed a cousin in an advanced stage of pregnancy, and her husband.

In the evening I went to see Ruth and Rudya, and there I met old Zalman Shalit as well, and heard the story of Mulka’s departure.

Ruth already knew that Mulka had successfully navigated all the obstacles and was now in Italy. We drank a toast to him, but if truth be told, our happiness was partial.

As for me, I needed to hurry up and organize myself a job or else finish my studies.

Isaac Katz was also living under our roof, in a corner of the flat. Sometimes he stayed overnight in the German prisoner of war camp, where he worked in the personnel department. Because of his wound and his slight limp, he had been conscripted again into the irregular army. Apparently his file contained no mention of his Zionist past and he was considered glatt kosher. He had, at any rate, a proletarian past, and being Jewish was not judged a hindrance in the performance of his duties at the POW camp. Even his command of German, nothing more than a camouflaged Yiddish, qualified him for more than mere guard duty. He looked after the personal files of the prisoners, took part in their interrogation

as a translator, and dealt with allocating prisoners for work in the factories and services that required manpower.

“Herr Oberinspektor Katz”—that is how the prisoners addressed him—did not evoke in the defeated Nazis any fears that he might remind them of what they and their ilk had done to his family and his people. He was not the sort to kick someone who was already defeated, humiliated, starving and battered. His education in the movement, and perhaps the qualities he had absorbed at home, helped him to resist the brutalization that so typified the wardens in the Soviet prisons and forced labor camps.

In November 1945, about a month after I had come to Riga, permission was given to hold a memorial service in the synagogue still standing in the Old City for the Jews who had been transported four years earlier and massacred in the Rumbuli Forest. The large hall was filled to capacity. The Jews of Riga and environs who had survived and returned, old and young, men and women, Jewish soldiers and officers from within the Soviet state who served in the city and who perhaps in their entire lives had never crossed the threshold of a house of worship—carrying in their pockets a Communist Party or *Komsomol* membership card—stood mutely, seeing in their imagination the scenes of atrocity at Babi Yar, Ponary, Rumbuli, ears echoing with the stories that made their way westward, told and retold by survivors and eyewitnesses. When the cantor began chanting the *El Maleh Rachamim*, hysterical weeping broke out on all sides and drowned out the sound of the prayer.

There was a sense that you were witnessing a lamentation that has repeated itself in successive waves since the destruction of the temple, through the auto-da-fé, the riots in Palestine in 1928 and 1929, the pogrom in Kishinev, the Petliura massacres; and now look, it has happened again in your own time, in your own city, although the newspapers warned of it, the marching songs and the beating drums on the radio presaged it, the ugly expressions on the faces in the outlying alleys and in the halls of the conservatories foretold it ... when even the gloomiest voices were sounding like optimists ...

Are we destined to continue treading on this cursed ground until the end of our days?

I was confronting the necessity of finding a job or beginning my studies, and not just to avoid being designated a “parasite,” which leads to legal problems. I went to the conservatory which I had studied before the war, and asked to continue my studies for the fifth and final year.

Whoa, dear comrade, you’re still alive? What luck! Really, what luck! You were very fortunate ... Yes, not many of you people did so well! You want to resume

your studies? Excellent, excellent ... You managed not to serve in the army and also to sit at the piano! You people certainly know how to get by. Well done. Leave your documents here, take these forms to the secretary's office, fill them out and leave them with the secretary. We will attend to your request ...

No, the nation has not changed: the same Jew-haters who sat here during the occupation, and before that. They would not have dared to talk that way had they not felt that anti-Semitism was fashionable. Their sensibilities are amazingly well-developed.

Malka arranged a piano for me. She worked at the municipality in the department of abandoned property, and among other things she oversaw were the pianos left behind by those who fled the city with the Nazis. Malka was an old-timer with the movement. Her sister was living in Palestine. Her two brothers had fallen in battle. She and her mother had fled to the east when war broke out and managed to become part of a remote *kolkhoz*, where Malka worked as a tractor driver to support them both. She would certainly be among the first to go on *aliya* once it became possible ... Meantime, she pestered me: "So where is Mulka?"

Here they are, returned from far-flung corners of a vast empire. Here they are, your comrades, your age or younger, members of *hachsharot* in former years, from the ranks of factories or schools, each one with his sad tale. I felt that they were all looking to me with one question: Nu—now what?

I could not encourage anyone. Although actually, who says they were expecting encouragement? Who put me in charge of the next step? Maybe the time had come to focus on immediate needs, how to make it through another day, to make a living, get food, give some encouragement to lonely parents ...

Would everyone just be looking out for themselves, now?

Even had we wanted to do something, we could not. The Holocaust, the bereavement, and above all the officially encouraged Jew-hatred that sprouted—all of that drew Jews together, drew friends together, brought old and young together, from sheer necessity.

Within a small circle, where we talked freely, I was repeatedly asked about Mulka's whereabouts. Rumors about his flight abounded, despite the "official" story that he had gone to Astrakhan. Wasn't he writing from there?

"Nu, from Astrakhan you want letters? From Moscow to Riga a letter takes five days, and you ask about Astrakhan ... I have no idea what happened to him ..." But I told some people that he had gone to Poland.

At the conservatory I bumped into Yekutiel Shor, our old friend from Dvinsk. He was studying the violin. His wife Bebbba was with him. Another comrade couple!

Rozit returned from the military hospital and found himself in Ruth's house. Where could he go? He had twice been seriously wounded and had lost an eye,

now replaced by a glass eye, which he could remove and reinsert. This “game” frightened the children a little, but they wanted to see it anyway. Rozit was now “fully handicapped.” He had not a soul. His entire family had been killed.

Yashka, the third of our Ural diaspora bunch, was still in uniform, serving in Eastern Prussia. He fought on until the fighting died down, and had fought almost since the beginning, and came out safe and sound. He apparently was saved because he fought in the artillery corps and because he was lucky—very lucky. He wrote to me from Eastern Prussia.

... The mood is very bad. To make a change and lift my spirits a little, I decided to get drunk, but there isn't any good wine. The guys got drunk on some kind of alcohol compound. I can't drink the stuff, so I'm still sober. For ten days we were on the offensive, advancing. Now they've given us a few days off. We crossed Poland and they gave us a good welcome. We crossed Prussia. There was total neglect and the population ran away. Our incursion was so rapid that it blocked all the roads, and now they are returning home in their high wagons. One cannot envy them. The hour of revenge seems to have arrived;—settle accounts with them, Yashka—the whole tally! After all, Sima [a friend from his group, who was burnt alive in the synagogue next to her house] was not in uniform, and all those infants in the various Majdaneks were not soldiers, either ... Apparently the education you gave me—you and those like you—was flawed. I am incapable of aiming my automatic weapon at the German women and their babies. I'm not justifying myself, and I don't try to stop others from doing it, but I restrain myself. I wish I could talk with you about the behavior here, but we will have to postpone that conversation until we meet in person ...

Raya and Mulka arrived in Praga, a suburb of Warsaw. The capital of Poland was in ruins. It was hard to find an intact house anywhere in the city. Not just the Nazi era ghetto, but the city center and the surrounding suburbs were mostly rubble.

The Pole thanks to whom the two had left Riga found an apartment somewhere there, whose landlady housed repatriates in exchange for money or goods. Afterwards it became clear that she was also not averse to “lifting” things on a minor scale from her new tenants.

They were very tired on “returning to their homeland” and they fell into bed, but after a few hours, Mulka's curiosity overcame his exhaustion:

I stayed at home and he went to explore the city. He returned a while

later, radiant with happiness. “What did you find?” I asked impatiently. “There are Jews. There is a community. There is a center. There is ‘Bricha’..

For the first time now, there was that word—*bricha*—signifying for them the way to *Eretz Yisrael*.

He already knew that the Zionist parties had some kind of a center in Warsaw and that there were organized departures to Palestine, known as the bricha. The two of us went to this large building, with Jews pushing past one another, going in and coming out, and we were welcomed nicely by the coordinator whose name I don’t recall. We asked him to send us to Palestine, so that they would not discover us and send us back to Russia. People of means had priority. No one there talked about Zionism. Anyone who looked Jewish raised no suspicion and was sent to join the ranks of the bricha ... They explained, and then explained again, that we had to claim to be survivors of the concentration camps.

We began getting rid of superfluous baggage. We sold some of our things and thus had a little money to buy food. We were then instructed to move to an empty school building. We lay on the floor. At night, the lights were turned on, and people speaking Polish and wearing army uniforms began investigating those present. Fortunately for us, they did not manage to question everyone. No one was arrested, and they went away.

We persisted and insisted that they send us. We had nothing to prove we were Polish, and couldn’t even speak the language ... The next day they told us that we were going. They explained that henceforth we would be Greek and that we would be going toward the Czech border. They taught us two words of Greek and said that we could speak Hebrew. The border guards can’t tell the difference between the two languages, and both are equally foreign to them. Thus we reached Bratislava, where there was a large concentration of refugees like us. Somehow we managed to find somewhere to sleep. They told us that we would have to undertake a mission—to find routes by which masses of Jews could travel—and meanwhile they ordered us to leave in the direction of Prague. About two thousand people were crowded together at the railway station. There were no tickets on sale. No one knew when the train to Prague might depart. People waited weeks, but we were in a hurry because of our assignment.

That same night we boarded a train, strapped ourselves to some

kind of railing, and rode out of there. I was very tired. I didn't feel how the two of us entered Prague on foot. We found a faucet and washed. We were going to an address we had been given, and when we arrived there we met a young man from [Kibbutz] Ayelet Hashahar—a shaliach (an emissary). He ordered us to leave for the east and find a route that Jews could travel. We went out and wandered around. Here and there we found some way to get through, just the two of us, but there was no route suitable for masses of people. At least we learned where the guards were. We drew maps, noting where the Russians were, where the British, the Americans, the French. All of that was important in finding a route. I don't remember the details, all the convoluted paths we took. We would double back on ourselves, encounter a Russian guard detail and flee. Once we were sure the people ahead were British, but when we got to the checkpoint we saw a Russian soldier. We had to get through that checkpoint no matter what, so we told the sentry that we were Austrian Jews returning home. We had all kinds of documents, but the guard could not read them, and said he would telephone to his superior. Luckily for us, the phone was not working. We told the sentry that we would stop by and explain to his superior—and of course we then skirted the building and got out of there.

The main thing was to somehow leave the Russian sector. We reached the American sector, where we were well received, but when we kept going, things got complicated. We started looking for any sort of representative of the Austrian authorities. Mulka spoke good German. He found some Austrian office and when he began explaining to the clerk that he was actually Austrian, the clerk stared back and inquired how he came to speak this Baltic-sounding German. Mulka explained that he was born in Riga but that he and his parents were Austrian citizens. The clerk shrugged and gave him the required document. We reached the river dividing the Russians from the Americans. A Russian sentry was standing on the bridge. Mulka showed him the document. The guard glanced at the German document and voiced a brief expletive conveying which part of his body he would use to deal with that paper ... Clearly we were not crossing the river at his post. Despairing, we also knew we were not going back. We sat down by the bridge and rested a while. When the sentry opened the crossing for some kind of vehicle, I began running across the bridge, with Mulka after me. I heard the Russian running behind us and shouting for us to stop. Glimpsing the American sentry up ahead, I shouted with all my strength, "Help! Help!" The Russian turned and

went back to his post. I fell into the arms of the American. The Russian began transmitting to the American that he should send us back. We told him we would not go. We would die—but we would not go back. We explained that we were searching for our parents. We spoke English with him. We made a big fuss and he gave in. We left him and there, ahead of us, we saw a large refugee camp. We went in.

In the camp, they took us to a Jew who was lying in bed. He was the coordinator for everything involving getting to Palestine. We explained about how we'd come there. We drew him lines on a map, showing where we had succeeded and where we'd had to double back. It was clear that none of the routes were suitable for large numbers of people.

We went to Salzburg. There, we found a lot of American Jews. They were giving practical assistance to *bricha* activists, supplying food and clothing. The camp looked very well organized. The American army handled supervision. The *aliya* people there instructed us to get to the area where the transport unit of the Jewish Brigade was parked, and they explained how to find our way. We set out on foot, but before we got to Vienna, we found ourselves too exhausted to go on. Someone suggested that we lie down by the roadside and keep watch - maybe a light-blue and white vehicle would pass by. Before dawn, we saw a vehicle like that, but the soldiers riding in it spoke only English and they thought we were insane—which is probably how we looked. We waited. When we saw another vehicle like that, we didn't know how to stop it so we ran into the middle of the road and shouted with all our strength: "Atzor! Atzor!" (Stop! Stop!) The vehicle stopped. The soldiers riding in this one could not understand who were these people speaking Hebrew and why they were out of uniform ... I burst into tears ...

The *bricha* was not much talked about in Palestine. Who had ever heard of it? Maybe one in ten people—or one in twenty?

When you asked about what the *bricha* was, the person you'd asked would stutter: "It's not exactly like illegal immigration ... well, sort of ... but it's not as ..."

Was part of the problem the term "*bricha*" (fleeing; flight) which, once employed, stuck?

"... Nu, really, *bricha*. Running away? From where? From what prison? What closed camp? We've heard this already; we've heard about this ..."

If they had asked Moshe Sharett, he would surely have found a different term, a more appropriate one. They did not ask. He was too far away.

People made *aliya* to *Eretz Yisrael*, but more than that—they were “illegals” [*ma’apilim*]. An odd term, it nonetheless bore its participants straight into the pages of history.

The *bricha* was about running. Running in fear of something, evidently ... Go try to explain it. Too late to change it.

And perhaps it was not the name that ruined the “historic public image” of this campaign to arrange transport and refuge for tens of thousands of survivors of the war and the Holocaust via southern Europe’s Mediterranean seaports; maybe the problem was the relatively marginal involvement of people from *Eretz Yisrael* among its ranks?

“Relatively marginal,” did I say? Do we lack things to argue over? And what of the emissaries?

Absolutely true. The emissaries did arrive later from Palestine, and not only to find new recruits in the wake of schisms in the various ideological movements, not only to train the refugees to add their weight in the political struggle then being waged internationally for a state ...

Most of the emissaries were themselves from the countries where the *bricha* was operating. Their very personal involvement in this effort was because they were themselves intimately connected with the people whose flight they were assisting. Some of them would wonder, suddenly: Without a certificate by a certain date, which brought me with the Second Aliya to Palestine before the war began, would I not be one of these displaced people myself, now—if not ashes altogether?

No, the *bricha* was not organized “from the top,” no one leading it was trying to imitate anyone, it wasn’t guided from Palestine; or at any rate, not to begin with. The leaders and organizers and supervisors and chiefs and coordinators—who didn’t even know how to refer to themselves—emerged along the way, in the process, appointed at a signpost at the border and crowned by the displaced residents of the camps.

The link, the code, the passwords—all the accessories required for an underground—were invented along the way: Navigation using maps and the stars was learned in the dark of night in the Carpathian Mountains and by moonlight in the Alps; the negotiations with officers of the various countries over the right to cross borders was conducted by uneducated diplomats with no protocol from a state-on-the-way and en route—on the roadways of Europe.

Well and truly, the Brigade people—the Jewish fighting force of WWII—the soldiers from *Eretz Yisrael*, were one hundred percent—the genuine article. And when the *Yishuv*’s pockets were empty, they turned to the Jews overseas, who did not let them down and will be remembered ...

But the utter alienation from their surroundings, the complete “divorce,” and hence the overpowering impulse to be gone from those shores, the fire of hatred

for “them,” the pain that burned until tears came, the disappointment, the loss of hope that anything could ever flourish there again, in the diaspora—there was no need to organize that, to teach it or direct it ... It was enough to catch the eye of Amalek, to feel his disappointment because “not all of them, we didn’t get them all ...”

People got up and left because they no longer had a house with a door worth locking, a neighbor worth parting from, a properly marked grave where a few stones could be ritually left in mourning.

So it was in Poland, in Romania, in Lithuania, and in Hungary ...

People got up and started walking—never to return. To get out of there—once and for all!

This was the realization of Zionism, and overnight it gave birth to its supporters and its leaders and its organizers and its volunteers. And its heroes ...

Who ever heard anything about it?

The young men of the Jewish Brigade were dumbfounded. Refugees? They don’t look like refugees ... and their Hebrew ... We hear Hebrew like that in Degania, or Kinneret ...

“Where to? To Eretz Yisrael?”

“Where else?”

The fellows put them into a car and brought them to where they were supposed to go. The two had a letter of reference from the *bricha* headquarters.

Raya’s story, continued:

We were tired and hungry. The man from the bricha took care of us, gave us a room and told us to go and rest. There were a lot of beds in the room. They told us that we could lie down. I slept a long time, a very long time. I woke up and understood that now it was night. Next to me sat some kind of sergeant, reading a book. Surprised, I asked him what he was doing there. He pointed to the bed and said he was waiting for me to vacate it.

I decided to go with this group to Italy. We already knew that bricha matters were being run from Italy. These people said they would help us and would take us there at the first opportunity. The brigade was parked at the Italian-Austrian border, and its trucks would cross the border at least once a day. The day before our departure, there was an interrogation at the border crossing, and the guards discovered that not everyone going through was a soldier. Now they were being more careful and we had to wait. For a few days, it felt like a wonderful vacation. To me, it was the most splendid hotel in the world.

The journey was arranged for us by someone from the Jewish Brigade and Mordechai Surkis, the “Diaspora coordinator.” Periodically he would travel from Italy to Vienna and back. He told us that when we crossed the border, we would be joined by a young woman who also had to get to Italy. She came from Poland and didn’t speak a word of Hebrew—only Yiddish and Polish. When I heard the Yiddish dialect she spoke, I preferred her Polish. We were also joined by some young men I hadn’t seen before. I and the other young woman were given uniforms from the women’s corps of the British army (the WATS), and the young men were given uniforms of the Jewish Brigade. They explained to us in which units we were serving and gave us a little information about them, which we had to learn by heart out of a military booklet, like where in Palestine we were going and where we had enlisted. It never occurred to me that I was supposed to explain all that to the young woman that Surkis brought to join us, and that was my downfall. When we got to the border, the guard stood us all in a row. All the guys did just fine on the check and I did, too. I answered that I was from Haifa, 32 Herzl Street, and the guard wrote it down and let me get into the outbound vehicle. The young woman from Poland got into trouble. She claimed that she lived in Sarafand and joined up in Haifa. When I tried to whisper to her that it was the other way around, the guard took me off the vehicle. The more exacting interrogation was my undoing: they asked me what my commanding officer’s name was, what my functions were in my unit, and a lot of other questions like that. They put me in jail. I had no money. I had no belongings. Mulka had everything. The jail was on the border. At the next interrogation, I changed the story I’d invented. The interrogators were mainly interested in where I had got the uniform from and, in general, who was behind our flight. The other young woman and I made up a story that we did not know each other, but had met en route and wanted to get closer to Eretz Yisrael. So we hitched a ride until we got one. We’d made friends with one of the guys on the truck named Baruch. That’s all we know about him. No, he didn’t take any money from us. We have nothing to lose; we have no home; we have no money. We don’t want to stay in Austria. We want to continue south. We won’t go back to where we had come from.

The interrogator asked us where we had come from. For the other young woman, it was easy to say she was from Poland, that she had been in a concentration camp, that she had a sister who she’d heard was in Italy now. I said I was from Danzig, that I had never had a

passport; that I have no parents, but that someone had seen a relative of mine in Italy ... Finally they charged us with impersonating soldiers in uniform and using forged insignia and papers, and we were sentenced to three months' imprisonment.

The closer Mulka got to Italy, the more ambivalent he got, and when he crossed that border—it began to bother him. *You saved your own skin, and that's it?*

When Mulka and Raya entered Poland, they had only one aspiration: to get out of Soviet-ruled territory, get away from there, and make their way as fast as possible southward—just not to fall into their hands. They slipped away, they got out, they succeeded ...

Now, first of all, he would have to rescue Raya from jail. The other guys promised to help. What to do?

In all of Europe, even in the Soviet-ruled parts, there was a broad cushion for these activities. Mulka realized that Europe outside the Soviet borders was divided not only into states but also into occupied areas. Masses of refugees—Jews, Russians, Poles, Greeks, and lots of others, all displaced remnants without a roof over their heads, perhaps even hundreds of thousands of them—were wandering around these areas every which way, with papers from the four occupying powers, identity cards and passports and all the other different kinds of documents issued by the various government offices, municipalities, DP camps—and sometimes even without any papers whatever.

In the Soviet-ruled areas, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria and East Germany, mobility was achievable by waving a colorful piece of paper with some kind of signature. Such documents could be created, purchased, filched. The Soviet guards could not always distinguish between them, but still it was better to circumvent their check posts when possible because, with the Soviets, there was always the risk of incarceration. In the American, British, and French zones, no one faced any real risks like that.

The people back in Riga knew nothing whatever about the *bricha*, or that Europe was permeable—in fact, open—in all directions, or that ships full of illegals were leaving Italy for Palestine ... Someone ought to let them know that borders could be crossed, even the sacred Soviet border, where the reigning bedlam could be exploited in the flight from Poland—and from there, onwards.

A letter; a code? No, these things cannot be passed along in writing. They have to be evaluated and analyzed quietly, and explained, and organized. Of course, improvisation would always be required, but in crossing the Soviet border—the hardest of all—things should be well-designed and organized. That such an opportunity would recur was highly doubtful. No, no, no—it would not.

Mulka had been lucky; he'd met Raya and things had worked out and here they were, in Italy. But why weren't the others lucky? Someone should organize

crossing points at the Soviet border—in Rovno or somewhere else (maybe Brest?). If Poles were crossing to Poland, why couldn't our people, from the movement in Riga or Dvinsk, be Polish too? In all the chaos at the border, no one was asking questions, and when someone did, he didn't speak Polish. The Soviet apparatus couldn't control it all.

No; it was impossible to explain in a letter what had to be done, and how ... and in another few months, the organized repatriation to Poland would end.

Hesitation was out of the question.

Conditions in the prison were bad, but they did not send us to work. We had a pencil and paper, and we decided that we'd take the opportunity to throw a message outside. When we did, we were caught, and put into solitary confinement—for which they used the prison showers. Another time, we saw through the window some guys who looked like Jewish Brigade soldiers. We wrote a note and threw it out. We had the impression that the guys found the note. One day, a soldier came to visit me, bringing me greetings from Zalman Levenberg, a leader of Betar in Latvia and Lithuania before the war (and now my husband). Zalman made aliya before the war. The soldier told me that Zalman was now stationed in Italy and working at the Diaspora Center, and promised that he would apply pressure and that we shouldn't worry. That was an encouraging visit. I was also visited by a rabbi from the British army, who told me that he could get me released on his authority on condition that I promised to return to Vienna and not try again to cross the border to Italy. I told the rabbi that I would not make a promise I could not keep, and he said that this was creating problems for the unit with the authorities, and again asked me to undertake not to cross the border. If, however, I were to go ahead and do it without his knowledge ... well ... that was something else. The upshot was that they would try to get me across the border but if they did not succeed, I was to wait for the right time and not try to do anything on my own. I promised.

After he'd made contact with emissaries from *Eretz Yisrael*, among them people from Riga, members of his movement and others, Mulka understood that people in Israel were busy with many important matters—resisting the British, settling the land, political struggles, continual wrangling among parties and factions and other indispensable things. The matter of bringing Jews to Palestine through a divided Europe and across the stormy sea—that was being handled in Italy. Hence he was in the right place.

Mulka worked to rescue Raya and her comrade in distress from prison as

quickly as possible, while meanwhile doing his utmost to help his friends stuck in the Soviet Union to get to Palestine—and he nominated himself as an emissary to the organization working on the campaign there. People hearing him blinked in disbelief: this guy just got out—and now he wants back in?

Zalman Levenberg commented, with a shrug:

Those of us from Palestine have seen the Holocaust refugees as a passive element in need of our help, since they cannot help themselves. It was clear to us that we had a sacred duty to do everything we could for them. Now for the first time I'm encountering a young man who came here from "there." And he is even more prepared than we are to risk everything for the cause ... Somehow, inadvertently, his personality and his actions hurt our Eretz Yisraeli pride. I worked very hard to persuade him that he should not take that kind of risk.

Mordechai Surkis, Yechiel Duvdevani and other emissaries all tried to dissuade Mulka from his intent to pursue this insane idea, while he explained to them yet again, as people lacking experience of the post-war Soviet reality: "I must go back, because they don't know there that getting out is possible."

And indeed, how could the people from Palestine have had any idea? How could one explain to them that from Vilna, Jews were managing to reach Poland, but meanwhile in Riga—a hundred and fifty kilometers away—they knew nothing of that, and thought themselves without recourse? People would have to be sent there to instruct them on how to proceed ...

Mulka knew that even if someone now in Italy were to volunteer for such a mission, he would be very unlikely to avoid all the obstacles and pitfalls en route; he would be unlikely to arrive at all. And if he did arrive, the comrades would suspect him of being a provocateur sent by the authorities and would not believe him, a stranger ... Mulka was not modest. He was sure that only he could do justice to this mission.

The troubling sense that he was deserting his comrades, leaving them behind without doing something to help them ... not a betrayal, but still—friends don't abandon their friends when they're in trouble ... This feeling had been with Mulka since he'd left Warsaw and intensified when the last Soviet roadblock was behind him. He knew that this uneasiness would not diminish even if no one else blamed him for defecting or for abandoning his friends. And what if there were to be mass arrests back there, or a resurgence of anti-Semitism? Better not to think about it ... But no—one had to think about it. Anything could happen in that crazy country; getting out of there was paramount ... And anyway, bringing the comrades to Palestine was an imperative. They of all people could not be excluded from what was happening in *Eretz Yisrael* ... They could not be left to rot in the Soviet Union.

Mulka was obsessed by the idea of going back to let his friends know that there was a way, that getting out was possible.

What did people know here in this Diaspora Center? How could they think of sending someone as an emissary to Russia who had not been there in the recent past? Did the fellows from Palestine think this would be like sending an emissary to England, or Belgium? Only someone who'd been through the Soviet system and understood it intimately could, just possibly, not fail in such a mission. And if he, Mulka, went back, it would encourage the people who were arguing that it was possible to move successfully through Europe now. Here, in Italy, everyone was busy with a thousand and one things. Everyone worked on everything at once; this little corner of the Jewish diaspora had no beating heart. Russia and the territories it had conquered, with its Jewish remnant that remained to be rescued—had the operatives in Italy dismissed them from their minds?

From day to day, he was more firmly persuaded that he must go back. "If anyone can do it"—he would say without blushing—"I'm the man. Why not? Are they looking for any other volunteers? Volunteers don't need to be sought. Volunteers show up without an invitation."

Eventually—after the Diaspora Center people finally understood that there would be no *aliya* from the Soviet Union unless the people there heard that it was possible, from someone trustworthy—they stopped arguing against the idea.

Yet the emissaries and others at the Diaspora Center went on arguing with Mulka, contending that at that point there were other equally important and urgent tasks. For example, someone would have to go through the refugee camps and decide who would go with the next group to Palestine and who would have to wait—a sensitive subject with political undercurrents ... Someone was needed at the headquarters of the illegal immigration campaign. Someone was needed immediately to do educational work with the displaced people: the situation was dire, and it demanded someone who understood what a pioneering movement was all about. Someone competent was needed to oversee the people dealing with purchasing. And they told Mulka that the members of the gar'in (core group) for "his" kibbutz, now in Binyamina and nearly ready to move onto the land in the northern Galilee—were waiting for him to join them.

These arguments served only to convince Mulka that these people did not get the point, because for all those other jobs, there were people with relevant prior experience; this was not the case regarding the mission he wanted for himself.

Finally Mulka got tired of useless arguments. He agreed that someone else could go—providing that only he, Mulka, would be charged with finding the right person for the job. Candidates were brought to him and he tested their fluency in Russian, including their mastery of current slang used by students and soldiers; he asked them where they'd served in the army and on which fronts

they had fought and who their superior officers had been. One after another, they failed to pass muster.

Until Mordechai Surkis finally concluded: “So let him go then, if he’s so determined. Here’s to his success! Get ready whatever he needs for his ‘journey to Alexander’ ...”

Mulka had already sent a few letters to Palestine: to his sister Yehudith in Jerusalem and to a few friends. He was expecting to get replies from people in the movement in Latvia and from former emissaries—in Afikim, in Kfar Giladi. But nothing came. Possibly the mails were in disarray due to the ongoing upheavals in Palestine? Or perhaps they were very busy there with their own pressing matters ... Elik Provat from Kfar Giladi, who for Mulka and his generation personified the image of a Shomer - surely would remember him.

Milan, 28 September 1945

Shalom, Elka!

I’m hoping that they have already told you that I am in Milan. Two of the women are going to Naples now, and I am taking advantage of the opportunity to write you a few lines.

That you are in Italy, I heard back in Prague, and I hurried here to meet you, but as you see, I was too late. It’s very unfortunate, because I wanted very much to see you. You can’t imagine how happy I was, after six years, to meet our friends again. But from a practical standpoint, meeting you in particular was crucial.

I won’t write at length about all that has happened to me in the last six years, and anyway not all of it can be written. The main thing is that, two months ago, I left my native city and I have been in Italy a week already. I was lucky enough to manage this, but don’t think it was so easy. The fact is that where I was living—where you used to live—there are only a few who managed to get out. And I had to leave Ruth there, although she was no less determined than I to leave. From a material standpoint she’s all right—relatively speaking. She is in good health and three months ago gave birth to a daughter (she already has a four-year-old son). Her husband is there, too. Nonetheless she wishes to follow me, and her husband likewise. There are dozens, hundreds of people ready to leave at any time, but they have no information about what is going on, and are held back by the terrible conditions there and a lack of means. After I got here and had a chance to think more clearly and less emotionally, after all the confusion of what I went through and what I saw here—don’t forget that I was torn up completely all the time by events and went through quite

a lot myself—I decided not to travel further, but to go back. You probably still remember a little about me and will understand that I can't be satisfied just to have saved myself while leaving behind hundreds of helpless people. I understand what may await me with all of this, but despite everything I've made up my mind. I wanted to find someone here among the soldiers who could do this work with me. But I have not found anyone here, and time is pressing; speed is urgent. Things were delayed a bit because at the center here, they don't want to let me go—they want me to stay and work here. But I think they'll send me anyway. You can see that if you were here, things would have been much easier for me, because I'm sure you would have understood better and hence been more supportive. But don't think that I'm criticizing the people here—they gave me a fine welcome, they're helping any way they can, and after some discussion they are willing to support me in this enterprise. But clearly someone who personally is pained and concerned for this particular part of Jewry will be caught up more in this matter. At any rate, so be it. I only wanted to tell you about the situation. In our city nearly everyone was exterminated, some killed on the battlefield holding a gun, others murdered while helpless. So I have almost no one to whom I can send regards from family, other than a very few ...

If I tried to write a list of all our people who are no longer alive, I would need much more space. But what for? All that has happened to us can't be written down. You have probably heard more than once already about all of this And so I can't be quiet, I can't rest until I have done everything I can to save the remnant, even if that puts me back in the den of the evil beast, with no certainty that I will get out again. If I could see you again, I would be endlessly happy. But I don't feel that I can take a week or more to come and see you. I'll have to be here another week or so to arrange everything, and then I hope to leave. Always assuming, of course, that things can be arranged here and that the center will fully support me in this, as I am hoping they will.

Regards to the people who still remember me. And if you have a chance, let me hear from you so that I will know that at least you got my letter.

So—lehitra'ot!

Mulka Yaffe

All around him—lots of activity. Italy was the arena for big, important actions, not for arguments at the Zionist Congress or people's assemblies; Italy was where they sent boatloads of illegals to Palestine.

... If we return quietly with the comrades, if we are successful, we will create a unit to deal with illegal immigration or we will join a team already working. Why should Jews sit in the DP camps to no purpose? They are needed in Palestine. They need Jewish reserves ... Although, there is one place, and we're not talking about Latvia, or Lithuania, where there is hardly anyone left. We have to invest some effort in the sort of people we met in Tashkent. Of course we'll have to be very careful, and some will not make it ...

... Who can understand this in Palestine? Everyone there thinks that the Soviet Union saved the world, and no one may, heaven forbid, do anything that could seem to be against the Soviet Union ...

... Rescuing comrades from the movement in the Baltic states—everyone agrees on that. But what about the Jews of Moscow and Kiev and Leningrad? Are they to be forgotten? Crossed off the list, as a lost cause?

Lyuba, Lyuba Golani knows the truth. Lyuba from Afikim, who was the last emissary to us, to the Latvian pioneering Zionist youth, and who in the 'twenties was with the main headquarters of *Hashomer Hatzair* in Russia ...

2 October 1945

Shalom rav, Lyuba!

After thinking it over, I decided to write to you, because I think you can understand me better than someone else could, and also you will be able to do more. They promised me that this letter will get to Palestine, so I want to write and tell you everything. First, some personal history: My last letters were evidently from Tashkent in 1944. After that, I was a student for about six months in Moscow. In December, I visited Riga and in March I returned to Riga and worked in construction at the port as something like an engineer. On July 27, 1945 I was able to buy Polish papers and get to Poland and from there, with the flow of refugees, I got to Milan. Now I am waiting here to get some things organized and I intend this week to go back in order to organize the departure of people from Latvia and Russia ...

Among the Jewish survivors who have gathered once again in Latvia and others who are spread around Russia there is a whole group of longtime Zionists who have been sentenced to prison, expulsion or death for their attempts to cross the border, but despite these setbacks most of them are not discouraged and are still looking for a chance to get out ... I'm not talking about a lot of people now (not to exaggerate), among the Jews of Russia itself, who would take advantage of any smallest escape hatch to get out and go to Palestine. So it's clear why I am going, although not whether I will

succeed. What I am saying can be verified among the refugees in any of the camps in Germany, Austria or Italy. Polish and Lithuanian Jews mainly, but also Latvians and émigrés from Russia itself (not Poles who ended up there)—those few who survived. And I think it is criminal that no one so far has thought about this part of Jewry, about whom I can say with complete responsibility that they are worth more than most of the refugees who are here now. I tried to find ways to rescue them without having to go back into the lair of the beast, but I've given up, and I've decided to try to do it myself.

I'm going to the Jewish Brigade now and there's still a chance that maybe from there I will be able to find someone appropriate who could get away to come with me. In terms of help (including financial) for this job, the people here have done everything possible, and if only a lot of money were all that I needed—I'm sure they would have come up with it. But there are also serious concerns about the success of this venture The situation there changes from moment to moment. Of course I will try to find other routes, but after all, you know Russia and you understand what this involves. By the way, I promised the comrades who stayed behind in Latvia that I would apologize to you for our not having believed what you said about Russia, when you spoke in the last Latvian council meeting. During all the years we were in Russia, we kept remembering what you said in that council. Maybe you've long since forgotten. You described for us what socialism meant in Russia, and we did not want to believe you. So please accept our confession—we transgressed!

Lyuba! I have so much to write to you about what happened to me and to all our people during the last five years, about all our peregrinations in the Soviet "paradise," but I am a bad correspondent and I don't have the literary talent to describe it all. I hope that we will yet meet and then we can talk. I thought I ought to write about all of that because I am not absolutely certain to return from this journey. But I don't want to write a will. I have to be daring and hope for success.

I would also like to write to you about my feelings about everything I've learned in the last month about Palestine and the movement (since everything that has been happening over the last five years was for me, today, a revelation), but I don't think I'm ready yet to take any kind of position and just chat; it's not worth it. I believe we will be seeing you and all our other comrades and then we'll find a way to talk about all this.

Please give my best to all the folks who still remember me and regards from everyone who is still there, waiting and hoping.

Shalom rav and lehitra'ot,

Yours,

Mulka

“It is criminal that no one so far has thought about this part of Jewry ...”

Raya's story continued:

They released us and we went back to the same unit, and the guys were very happy. It turns out that because of us, there was trouble with the unit's major. Surkis also arrived, and from him I heard that Mulka had made a huge fuss there. He wanted to come and get me released, because who knew what punishment they would give us ... And Surkis added, “He claimed it was his wife. I did not believe him. No one gets that upset over a wife.”

I started to ask about him, and Surkis said that Mulka was planning to come back. I could not understand why he would do that. It was strange, since I was going to go on to Italy soon, but Surkis said there was something else: “He will tell you himself.”

Mulka came back. I did not recognize him right away. He was wearing a British uniform which suited him amazingly well. He told me outright that he was going back to Riga.

No! No! For that, I was unprepared. We had come such a long way; to go back now was more than was required of us. We had agreed that our first priority was to get to Eretz Yisrael. Why go back now and have to repeat that awful journey we'd already made once? But I saw that my arguments would not move him; his mind was already made up. Nor did he suggest that I go back with him ...

I asked him what he could do in Riga before we got to Palestine. What could he do there? And he began explaining that the operation to get Jews out of Europe and into Palestine was being run from Italy, not from Palestine. No time should be wasted; Italy is where everything was being organized. We had never imagined that the Jewish Brigade would be involved in this. He added that people in Riga simply did not know that there was a way to reach Palestine and we had to get this information to them and explain how they could proceed. I had no good answer, but I replied that someone from the Jewish Brigade should go, whose British documents would protect him, but he said that wouldn't work because someone who had not already been

in the Soviet Union would run into trouble there too easily. I knew he was right. I also knew that nothing I said would change his mind.

He stayed in that camp for another two days.

We parted. I never saw him again. And I never received any word from him.

Was she hurt? Was her amazement at his decision and her assessment of what he was doing, mixed up with disappointment at his not giving her more consideration?

Raya is reticent by nature. She doesn't dramatize. Her speaking voice conveys no—nearly no—emotion. Nor would I enjoy getting her to speak out: We both belong to a generation that left matters between a man and a woman to the people directly involved.

Perhaps as time passed, the hurt was dulled? Perhaps ... although I imagine that even then, when they parted in the fall of 1945, she would have been reserved. Clearly she understood immediately the degree of risk and the implication that “who knows if we would see one another again ...” But would she have laid bare her feelings to him? Would it have occurred to her to say something like, “Maybe don't go after all—for me?”

Mulka, when he came back to us from Italy, did not volunteer to say much about this.

Raya—many years later—gave herself away most by saying, “I knew he was right, not I.”

Was she hurt? The question is not particularly relevant today, and certainly was not relevant in the autumn of 1945.

■ ■ ■

“Alexander” was the nickname of Zvi Netzer, born in the western Ukraine, a member of the Dror movement. After the war broke out, he ended up in Vilna, formerly a Polish city that became the capital of an independent Lithuania until the Soviet occupation. From the ports of that country it was still possible to leave for Palestine, when the other European routes were already blocked. Free nations did not volunteer to absorb Jewish refugees. The pioneers of tomorrow, old graduates of the training programs and the youth movements, sat at their headquarters in Vilna, trying to clear a way through to Sweden, or to Japan—but very, very few succeeded.

The situation in Vilna was rough, and at the headquarters the frustrations multiplied, but in the Polish territories conquered by the Soviets and annexed to the Ukraine or to Belorussia, the situation was worse. There, one could not even

hope that, when the war ended, one would finally be able to get to Palestine. In September 1939 the residents there had been turned into Soviet citizens in all respects, whether they wished it or not; and as such, they had lost any right to argue that they wanted to emigrate to Palestine. As everyone knows, they had been “released” by the Soviets from all their pain and suffering.

In consequence, Jews from the Soviet-conquered / liberated areas of eastern Poland had begun crossing clandestinely from there into Vilna, capital of the independent Lithuania, driven by their hopes of reaching Palestine from there. Very quickly this spontaneous trend became organized. Vilna was for intake and sorting people out, and on the new border between the Soviet Union and Lithuania, which was near the Belorussian town of Lida, a covert “transit station” came into being under the supervision of the activists. Zvi and other comrades worked on getting pioneers started on the long road to *Eretz Yisrael*, the precursor by four or five years to the much larger *bricha* movement.

If the postwar *bricha* movement is known to relatively few people, this “pre-*bricha*” chapter is known to even fewer.

One night during the hard winter of 1939-1940, Zvi Netzer left Vilna heading for the Soviet border near Lida to check why the flow of clandestine traffic from the other side had halted. He was arrested by the Soviet border police and sent to a forced labor camp in Siberia. Zvi was not the first to be arrested. Others had already been arrested; he meant to find them.

We shall skip the story of his incarceration, of what was termed a “trial” and of his life in the camp. When war broke out between Germany and the Soviet Union, many Polish citizens in Soviet prisons were released. Among those was Zvi, who immediately headed south toward Central Asia (the “Zionist instinct” had directed him rightly). He decided to try to infiltrate—believe it or not!—the Polish army, which got itself organized and departed for the Middle East. Despite the governing principle of “anyone but Jews,” by some miracle he actually got on a boat and sailed with the Poles, ending up in the capital of Persia.

In Teheran Zvi met Shaul Avigur, who was directing the provision of assistance to Jews in the Soviet Union. The outcome of that meeting was that by some mysterious route the Polish refugee ended up in a British corps—at any rate, wearing a British uniform. Thus garbed, Zvi departed and made his way to Kibbutz Alonim. His wife, who had preceded him, was there waiting, along with his friends and work in the kibbutz orchards.

The pastoral idyll at Alonim came to an end in 1945, when Shaul Avigur invited Zvi to have a chat. Zvi then returned to his kibbutz, bid farewell to his wife and little daughter, said goodbye to his friends and left for Poland along the same alternative routes used by the illegal immigrants to Palestine—even sailing on one of their boats, but in the opposite direction.

The kibbutz had to name someone else to run the orchards.

Zvi, thereafter Alexander, finally arrived in Lodz, Poland, at No. 18 Poludnyova Street—the intake headquarters, gathering place, clubhouse, and management center all rolled into one.

It was at this juncture that Mulka, just returned from Italy, met Zvi. They immediately had a common language.



Late in August of 1945, Kopel Skop left Kirghizia heading west and came to Lvov, unofficial capital of western Ukraine. Lvov had a magnificent Jewish history. For Galician Jews, this was the mother city, a center of Torah and general learning and economic prosperity amid a flourishing, materially and spiritually rich community life. The Holocaust erased all that but now, with the war over, many Jewish families hastened to Lvov. Polish Jews who had survived in the Soviet Union came to Lvov as a transit point to their country of origin, and many Soviet Jews were enchanted by the city's European character, still in evidence, and by the economic opportunities it offered.

Kopel felt alone. His Polish friends, people he had known during the evacuation of Kirghizia near the Gobi desert, were arriving slowly; he finally found somewhere to sleep, at the house of a former work colleague, a Soviet Jew who knew nothing of his real intentions. Kopel told his host that he thought to find work in Lvov, and if not, that he would go to Riga.

On Kopel's last visit to Tashkent, our friend Polya had given him the name of a respected Polish Jew in Lvov who could be helpful to him there, and indeed this man introduced him to the head of the local Jewish community.

Kopel's story:

I had heard a little about the head of the community and I had checked whether it was all right to speak with him openly. After looking into this thoroughly, I reached the conclusion that I could talk to him, although of course who knows ... I understood that the head of the community in Lvov would not be holding this position without the agreement of the NKVD. The man had a lot of self-confidence and yet I wondered how the leader of the Jewish community could be afraid of no one? Nevertheless, I decided that I would talk with him candidly. I told him that I wanted to go to Poland and that I wanted an evaculist [a transit permit to Poland]. I had money that I had earned and saved during those years and I would make a contribution to the community: I was prepared to contribute five thousand or

ten thousand rubles, but there were some other Jews he would have to help ... I don't know how, but this man made friends with me, told me what was going on in the community and how he worked. Then he invited me to his home, where I was embarrassed by the splendor of the furnishings and paintings, his beautiful wife and even the large dog. The man told me that he had a sister in Tel Aviv and gave me her address (he already knew that I wasn't planning to stay in Poland), he told me about his life, about his former work in the Cheka [an acronym meaning "the Special Committee"—the internal security services during the first years of the Soviet regime], about his intimate knowledge of the regime. He added that he would like to leave his position in the community, but that the NKVD people wanted him to stay ...

The truth is that his stories frightened me, but I also saw that the man had a warm Jewish heart, because he worried and suffered as a Jew. One evening at his home, I met his parents. I had a good impression of them, too. In short, I made friends with him.

One evening, when the evaculist was already in my possession, the head of the community told me that he grieved terribly for the Jewish children orphaned in the Holocaust who were living in the Lvov area with non-Jewish families. He said that he had already rescued some of them and located relatives in America who had sent sums in dollars to ransom the children. In one location fifty kilometers from Lvov, he said, there was a group of Jewish children at a monastery. He was trying to rescue them from there, but did not have the funds required. This story troubled me greatly. A few days later, I went to him and told him that I was going to Poland and thought I would be able to find some Jews there who would take an interest in the fate of these children.

"I am at your service," he told me. "If I had the means necessary, it would be possible to rescue them."

I told him that I needed evaculists for about 300 of my comrades. "Could you get them?"

That, too, he promised me to arrange, and although the city was rife with rumors about the imprisonment of Jews, implying that he had a hand in the matter, I did not change my opinion of him. I went on speaking with him openly ...

Kopel was thinking feverishly that if there were 300 good permits for transit to Poland waiting in Lvov, he would only have to fill in the names of those leaving, and that would solve everything! All the surviving members of the movement in

the Soviet Union would get out: not only from Tashkent, not only from Riga, but also those who had not yet returned from the army and from the places they had fled to when the war broke out ...

And he knew that he had to hurry and get to Poland, so that he could rescue those children, the children of the Holocaust.

Kopel left his host's house, detoured to a bookshop, bought a book in Russian and went home again. Meticulously, using the agreed-on code, he recorded the important information he had received, and added for good measure, "For my friend Yaka, on his birthday," wrapped the book in paper and send it to me in Riga.

A mixture of hope and fear possessed me when I had decoded his message.

Kopel, with the *evaculists* in his pocket, left Lvov en route to Poland. At the border, for some reason, all the travelers were taken aside and an intensive search was conducted. To Kopel, who did not know Polish, it seemed that they were looking for him ... The shadow of the Soviet Union and of the police pursued him. But he crossed the border safely.

Once in Poland, Kopel began looking cautiously for a way to Palestine. As he told it later:

I don't remember the details of my arrival in Poland or the things I initially did there. I was so happy that I walked around as if intoxicated.

In Cracow they told me that Hashomer Hatzair or Hechalutz was somewhere in the city. I found some Jewish club and began asking around in a whisper—I was still afraid to talk out loud about these things. "Yes," they said, "there are a lot of movements, and the center is Lodz." I also obtained an address. I left for Lodz, I went to No. 18 Poludnyova Street, the address in my notebook. I went inside. It was called a "kibbutz," but it was more like a clubhouse with beds. There were some Lithuanians there. I knew them by their Yiddish pronunciation. I spoke with them. This was a place anyone could come to, and could sleep there ... I circulated among the people, wanting to understand, to get a feel of who would be all right to talk to. I said that I'd heard that people left from there to go to Eretz Yisrael ... It was not a secret. People discussed it openly.

One day, at that same building, as I was coming downstairs from the second or third floor, I saw a good-looking young man with a moustache, coming toward me ... I thought I knew him, but wasn't sure ... Suddenly I realized that it was Mulka. He recognized me, too. Note that I did not know him very well. Now and then I had met him

at the club in Riga, and later I saw him once or twice in Tashkent. Can you imagine? There I was, a Latvian alone in Lodz—and suddenly a meeting like that! We embraced, we kissed. The tears came to our eyes ... “Ho!” he said to me, “I already have contacts. I’ve been here for a while already.” And he took me to Antek Zukerman, Avia, Stephan Grayek, Alexander. [Yaacov] Zerubavel was also there. We walked, we held meetings ... ”

Kopel told the comrades in Lodz about his time in Lvov and the negotiations that were conducted with the head of the community there. In that context, a plan took shape to set up a multi-movement *aliya* center in Vilna, to which Mulka would go, while Kopel went back to Lvov. The two centers would work separately from the outset, with no connection between them, to insure secrecy; when the two were well organized and entrenched, and if the need arose for contact, emissaries would be sent to put them in touch with each other. The plan also covered means of transferring money, the posting of emissaries to the two centers, various codes, modes of reporting, and so forth.

Since Kopel’s chances of success seemed very good, it was agreed that after he got organized, he would let Mulka know that he should start sending immigrants to him. And it was agreed that these immigrants from the Baltic states would fall into one of three categories: members of former pioneering movements and their families, including *Betar* people (which we applauded, although some mused that this idea could have been contemplated even without a Holocaust befalling the Jewish people); former Zionist activists with their families, mainly those in danger of imprisonment now; and orphans without a Jewish home to take them in.

Regarding Lvov, the policy was to be more “liberal”: Kopel was instructed to send to Poland any Jew that he was sure would go to Palestine.

The Lvov center did not have the painful problem of members of pioneering movements from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia who could not get out of the Soviet Union legally because they had never been citizens of Poland. Hence Kopel was instructed to act as he saw fit regarding any Jew wishing to immigrate to Palestine. There was no need to mention to him the importance of rescuing the children of the Holocaust, particularly since the Youth Aliya program took care of those expenses.

Yacov Yanai:

... We are sitting in Kopel’s house in Ramat Aviv and trying to recall events from seventeen years earlier; his life has changed so drastically in the interim. Kopel, the most sensitive of anyone to the truth of what is said, asks for a time-out so he can play a kind of personal video clip,

the content of which I am presenting as we heard it; although without the ability to give you the overtones, which may have been the most important part.

“... Now I would like to speak about something on a personal note ... No, not exactly on a personal note, but a few personal words ... You understand, Yaka, it was very hard for me to return to Russia, and I don’t know how or from where I got the strength to go back, because I knew that it was very dangerous.”

“Who gave you the idea?”

“What, that it was necessary to go back? When Mulka talked about his journey [to Vilna], I told him about my connections. And then they decided that I should go, too. To Lvov.”

“They decided without you?”

“No. With me.”

“Whose idea was it? Did you just volunteer?”

“No. I did not volunteer.”

“Mulka did not suggest it to you?”

“No, no. Listen, of course we talked things over. I can’t tell you who first raised it. Maybe Mulka said to me first: ‘Kopel, you know what? You should go to Lvov. Instead of continuing onward.’ Mulka also told me—we talked a lot—that he would not move on, himself, until he got the others out. Mulka went back with the utmost enthusiasm! The utmost! He volunteered on his own! I don’t know whether I would have ... No! I am sure that it was not me who said I should go back. They suggested that I go back. And when they suggested it to me, I talked about how I wanted to be in Palestine for family reasons; that I wanted to be in Palestine sooner. I requested, I asked whether they could manage without me, if someone else could go, rather than me. Not that I thought that someone else should be the one to get stuck. It was just that I did not volunteer to go. They suggested it to me so I went. And then, when I decided [myself] that I ought to go, I stopped discussing it ... ”

“Were you surprised that Mulka was going back?”

“No, it did not surprise me ... If that had surprised me, I would not have thought to go myself. But when they decided I ought to go, they got no arguments from me ... ”

It is up to me, the impartial narrator, to explain that Kopel actually had a sound basis for saying that he had to be in Palestine for family reasons. His girlfriend was waiting for him there.

A few days later, when we met again, Kopel on his own initiative returned to what was on his mind:

“ ... I carried out my mission like a soldier. When I got to Poland, I explained to Alexander how things stood. Now I remember that I also told him, that if someone were going to Lvov in my name, they would have all the connections I had made there ... One thing was clear: When I got to Poland and met with the Holocaust survivors there, and heard from them what had happened to them, and what had happened to our people—and even though we were in Russia and we read in the newspapers about the war and about everything that had happened, and everyone felt what had happened to his family ... But this made an even stronger impression. And when I got to the Warsaw Ghetto with Yitzhak Zuckerman and he told me about the struggle and about the whole tragedy there, and the heroism, and when we met with a lot of comrades who had miraculously stayed alive, under very harsh circumstances, obviously there was a feeling—that I think everyone was feeling, including me—that everything we had done up to that point in the movement and in our lives for our idea and for our people—was not enough.

“ ... Overall, I don’t think I’m naturally a man who rushes to lead things. I’ve never had an impulse like: ‘Action!’ And as for the desire to lead others or to stand out: all my life I was afraid that people would suspect that I wanted to stand out in some way ... ”

How different Kopel and Mulka were by nature, yet how similar in their sobriety; somehow these two serious fellows, so basically different yet alike, set out on an act of such self-sacrifice. This was no caprice. This was something different, entirely different, and to understand it requires a different context, perhaps that of parallel revolutionary movements in human history.

The future connection between the two branches of the *bricha*—in Vilna and in Lvov—and the connection of each with the *ma’on* (the safe house, or base)—i.e., with Alexander in Lodz, was discussed over and over by Zvi, Mulka and Kopel. One might have supposed that the connection between Vilna and Lvov would be via emissaries and couriers, and that among those leaving Vilna and Lvov for Lodz, across the border, would also be experts at various things who could help explain and report in person to the *ma’on* or bring a written message; but sending emissaries or couriers in the opposite direction, that is, from Poland to the Soviet Union, was much more complicated. The person could be detained at the border; to send him cost a lot of money; and his return to Poland also was fraught with danger.

Hence the permanent emissaries, Mulka and Kopel, were given broad “autonomy.” Their judgment was supposed to govern all tactical decisions. For instance, in choosing who should be gotten out of the Soviet Union into Poland, the actual decision in each case was in the hands of the emissary himself. The task of the *ma'on* couriers was to bring money—when it could not be raised locally—along with news of what was going on in Palestine and in the movements in Poland.

As for the funds needed for operations in the Soviet Union, the emissaries were authorized to raise it locally, generally from Polish exiles whose right to cross the border “to their motherland” was absolutely clear and unchallenged, so that they had no need of our help, other than that they often possessed large sums acquired by doubtful means. Taking money across the border, in any form, even in Soviet currency, was prohibited, and doing so endangered the perpetrator and his entire household. The same policy held regarding gold, precious stones and rare metals. Some people tried to outsmart the authorities with various imaginative stratagems, but anyone who had accumulated a large sum through bribery or perks or various unlawful or shady “commercial schemes” always ran the risk that a covetous neighbor or jealous colleague would report them, in which case all their belongings and the entire household’s personal effects were thoroughly searched at the border. People of this sort, if they were prepared to trust us, could deposit sums of money or other assets—usually gold—with us in exchange for a small coded note that they could exchange in Lodz for the sum due them, at an agreed-on rate of exchange. Of course, we could not publicize these transactions, but we generally made contact with the well-to-do so as to assist them with “transfers,” as we called these unofficial capital transactions.

A list evolved of agreed-on terms, names, and nicknames for correspondence and even in conversation: Vilna was “Don”; Riga was “Rivka”; Mulka was “Petras”; Yaka was “Yefim”; Poland was “Tuvia”; imprisonment was “the baby is a boy”; a 10-ruble gold coin was a “*hazerl*” (piglet); gold coins worth a thousand rubles were “books”; actions in the field relating to the movement of people across the border were “*abam*” (a Yiddish acronym, *abi men zet zich*, meaning “the main thing: see you again”); and so on and so forth.

As agreed ahead of time in Lodz, every group or individual going to Poland would be given a small note, about one square centimeter, with letters and numbers signifying the number of the shipment, date dispatched, number of people travelling and the movement affiliation (of the group’s leader). This scrap served as a kind of documentation that its holder was not a provocateur trying to infiltrate the organization; the date and shipment number would enable the team in Lodz to be sure that all the “packages”—as the departing groups were known—arrived safely, and the movement affiliation would make it easier for the people to find their comrades on the other side. A member of a Zionist movement was “I”; any other sign was “unaffiliated”; the respective movements were coded with

letters of the Hebrew alphabet: *aleph* was *Hashomer Hatzair*—*Hano'ar Hatzofe-Halutzi*; *bet* was *Gordonia*; *gimmel* was *Hashomer Hatzair*—*Hakibbutz Ha'artzi*; *dalet* was the General Zionists; *heh* was *Betar* and Revisionists; *vav* was for the Orthodox; *zayin* was “miscellaneous others.”

The money transfer slips were very complicated and would prevent a con artist (if any were lurking) from recreating a slip in an effort to collect money falsely.

These tiny notes were made of the very fine paper in which Russian cigarettes were wrapped (*papirossa*). Such a scrap could even be inserted into the end of a cigarette whose owner could hold it in his mouth during border searches. We also used traditional encryption devices like special ink or acid.

At the planning meeting in Lodz, it was also agreed that the emissaries would go to the Soviet Union for a period of three months at most, and then be replaced with locals or with new emissaries sent for the purpose. No one thought that it would be possible to move a lot of people across the border without the authorities catching on eventually—and as soon as they did, there would be a search, discovery, and arrests.

Rudya, Ruth's husband, was not a frequent visitor at our house. If he appeared, it meant something urgent was up. One wintry November day, there he was; we went outside and began walking toward his house while he told me that “some young woman arrived who wants to speak with you. Only with you.”

Malka came from the Lithuanian city of Kovno. She removed a rolled scrap of paper from the folds of her sweater—a letter from Mulka with a coded message: In a few weeks he would arrive at our place; there was a way; I should get a trustworthy team ready who could handle the transfer of comrades and their families over the border; when he got here he would explain in more detail, but meantime I was to begin organizing the team without delay.

All the questions exploding like fireworks remained, for the present, without answers. Malka Fugatzky—the Kovno woman—did not know Mulka. She had taken the letter to Rudya's address as she had been instructed, and handed it over to a man who identified himself to her as “Yaka.” She was familiar with the rule “Don't ask” from before the war. She was supposed to leave Riga for Tallinn, also on an errand, and I was supposed to help her get a train ticket.

Concerning what was happening in Kovno and Vilna, she related that there were Jews there clandestinely joining the stream of Polish repatriation. Someone very eager can find a way. For example, a bribe can turn you “Polish”; you can marry into a Polish-Jewish family. This requires money, of course, and some attempts had failed. A pilot who promised to take a group of Jews to Poland took off with them from the Vilna airfield and landed twenty minutes later at the same place. The passengers were surrounded by security agents and transported di-

rectly to prison. There had also been other failures, but there were always more Jews ready to try, undeterred.

Malka had once been a Communist party sympathizer, which accounts for her sensitivity to security. In the ghetto, she began to lose her political illusions, and once outside—when the underground had asked her to get Jewish infants and children out and into the hands of farm families—she had learned about “peace among nations” in practice.

“How did you stay alive?”

“By some miracle ... ”

Toward the end of the war, the task of rescuing children became easier. A Jewish infant in the hands of Lithuanians was considered a kind of insurance policy. “When the Jews and the Communists,” as the Lithuanians put it, returned to power, the Jewish infant would be proof that they had rescued someone ... but “a girl was better. A girl could not be identified” [by circumcision]. The Russians had not yet arrived.

Malka was soft-spoken, practical, and devoid of emotion. Her grey eyes, as she quietly scrutinized you, bespoke decisiveness and courage. Everything about her was measured, reasonable, level-headed.

Those quick-witted Lithuanian Jewish young women had undergone terrible experiences; it had toughened them and made them very focused and grounded ... and their grey eyes were very determined ...

Or was I imagining all of that?

Lodz, 4 November 1945

*To the leadership of Hashomer Hatzair, Hanoar Hatzofi-Halutzi
(Netzach)*

Attention of Lyuba Golani

Shalom rav!

After writing a few times to some comrades privately, I am now writing to you—as the movement; my movement. I am writing in my own name rather than in the name of what’s left of our movement, but I think that most of our comrades would sign this letter, although I had no opportunity to ask their opinion ...

... You should know that the five years we lived cut off from the movement and from Eretz Yisrael, serving in the army, struggling to survive, living through totally unfamiliar problems and experiences—not only did all that not permit us to grow and progress (or retreat) together with the movement, but it excised a great many things we thought and believed in, beforehand.

And while the Polish and even part of the Lithuanian movements were still able to maintain some of the movement connections among themselves, and between them, our movement in Latvia was left on its own, completely isolated ...

... Our people, most of them, were able to retain their pioneering spirit and their humanity, and stayed faithful to our ideals, but their movement awareness narrowed and lost focus ... We all came here thinking of, and aspiring to, unity, all kinds of unification, especially of the kibbutz movement. We came without any information about what was happening, but with a great desire for unification, to create a single force that could smash everything, conquer all ...

... As to the existence of the Lithuanian Pioneering Scouting Youth, you have known for some time now. The first immigrants have already arrived. Don't you understand that the moment we came to life, i.e., came to Poland—we were in need of your knowledge, your guidance, your help—first of all ideologically? Despite the great destruction, a handful of us remained, but a handful ready for anything, only not with their eyes closed ...

... Only not with our eyes closed—the lesson learned in the Soviet Union! Such a costly lesson ...

... There is another problem I want to write about, and I myself am surprised that this question has not arisen sooner. I am sure that you have already heard about the situation in Russia, about the widespread anti-Semitism, about the nationalism so rampant there now. Isn't now the right time to think about rekindling the Zionist spark in Russia? I am convinced that if we only could get to a clear understanding that this is necessary, we would find the people to volunteer for this, despite the chance or even the certainty of extinction in this action. But even here the crux of the question is financial. I would really like to know the opinions there on this, especially yours, Lyuba ...

... The vision of the dry bones, 1945, according to Mulka Yaffe. I read this letter again, a quarter of a century after it was written, and hold an imaginary conversation with its writer:

Nu? Did you get an answer from Lyuba Golani? I mean, about your amazing suggestion that the time has come to think again about rekindling the spark of Zionism in Russia ...

“From Lyuba, no; but from the Jews of Russia themselves, yes, I did. A belated reply, but still a reply. So why this ironic tone in your question? You even call this part of my letter ‘the vision of the dry bones according to Mulka,’ or something like that ...”

[The handwritten letter reproduced on page 120 reads:]

9 November 1945

Shalom Huja,

I imagine you have already heard of my appearance in Europe. While I was in Italy, I wrote a few letters to Lassia Galili and Lyuba Golani, where I wrote in detail about all our affairs and about what I intend to do. At present I have an opportunity from here, from Lodz, to send a letter and I am writing this time to you, although I hope that you have already read my earlier letters. I arrived here a few days ago, and I intend a journey of redemption to my point of origin to help them as required. We have a lot (so to speak) of comrades still at loose ends, and I could not permit myself to continue on my way without doing everything possible for them, and I hope I'll succeed. The success of this whole enterprise greatly depends on money. Initially I thought there was enough money, but when I really got into it, I saw that it would be really good if you folks, at least in the kibbutzim of our countrymen, would collect a little money for this purpose. If you think this is possible and appropriate [next phrase crossed out], make the arrangements in the manner you are surely familiar with there, but definitely indicate the direction—for what purpose and where, and then the money will reach me. I've already written about this to Lyuba and I hope that all of you together can arrange this.

I've already written you numerous letters but so far the only response I received was one telegram signed by Edit and Lassia Galili. I don't have all the details. I would be very happy if you were to write to me. Write to Yitzhak Steiner in Prague and he will make sure I get it. Use the name Yisrael Levine.

I hope that soon Ruth and I will see one another again. I would ask only that in your letters to there, don't mention my name at all.

Warm regards to everyone, Nyumke and Nachumke—Nyumke's brother is alive and well in Riga; and to Gita Lev, etc.

Shalom rav, and be seeing you ...

Mulka

[below, Yaka continues his imaginary conversation with Mulka]

The irony has to do with the time and place. Did you really mean to abandon the work in Vilna and Lvov and leave for Moscow or Leningrad or Kiev? At the end of 1945?

“No. In fact, I did not abandon it. But you surely must know that they sent emissaries to Central Asia and all kinds of places ... In my opinion they could also have thought about the Jews of Russia and the Ukraine, but not instead of the places to which emissaries were sent.”

Don't draw comparisons. Those who dispatched the emissaries knew that someone was waiting for them, no matter where they were sent. Someone ought to have said to the movement people who ended up in far-flung corners of Russia: 'Folks, from Poland people are embarking for Palestine! So come to Poland! And to do that, you do such and such, and quickly—so you don't miss out.' You suggested something else: To renew the Zionist idea and even beyond that—to renew aliya from there. But in Moscow and Leningrad there were no emissaries waiting from the Second Aliya [Hamossad l'aliya bet] ...

“That's right. But I don't think it was such a far-fetched idea. It's a fact that when Golda came to Moscow—only four years later—what happened there? The Jews organized a demonstration of support, the like of which had not been seen in the Soviet Union since the 1920s, aside from something 'organized by ...’”

Not a convincing response. The State of Israel arose, and this event electrified the Jews. Moreover the innocents who did not understand, perhaps in their innocence thought that after Gromyko's UN speech, the Soviet authorities would back such a demonstration.

“Nu, nu—you are casting aspersions on the intelligence of Moscow's Jews ... who in fact understand; they can guess how the authorities will react. The point is that it would have been appropriate to 'ignite the spark,' if you'll pardon the poetic turn of phrase. It really was a bit pretentious ...”

You yourself judged, in a conversation we had at the time, that such an action would have cost us about thirty arrests ... You also boasted that people would show up for an action of this sort—that is, to do the igniting—and that all we lacked was the money. Let's suppose that they had sent us plenty of funds (which sounds hallucinatory when you review our correspondence from that time, full of pleas for money); do you really think that you would have succeeded in getting

out of Russia and into Poland even half the number that got out via Vilna? You would have settled for fifty immigrants from Russia, or seventy ... in exchange for the thirty that would have been sent to the camps for 10-to-25 year sentences?

“Since when do you take a mercenary approach to *aliya*? *Aliya* is not about commercial profit and loss ... And where do you get the figure of thirty sacrificed? Maybe twenty, or—conversely—forty? But what if in exchange for those imprisoned, some fifty people had managed to get to Palestine from Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Kharkov! They would have created the bridge, established continuity for Russian Zionism, proving to the *Yishuv*, to themselves and to Jews in the Diaspora that no Communism-Bolshevism-Stalinism had changed the basic fact that the Jews of Russia need a homeland. Because the USSR does not function as a substitute homeland for them. Quite the opposite ... How many Jews in Palestine and elsewhere believed in 1946 that Jews as a nationality in the Soviet Union were in trouble, because of Communism? That Jews would not be going to Palestine due to a lack of basic necessities or housing? You must remember how the Jews in *Eretz Yisrael* and elsewhere were pleased and astonished when some professor or other in the Soviet Union was a Jew, when some pilot was a Jew, or some doctor ... They paid attention when Ilya Ehrenburg and others like him said: ‘What do Soviet Jews lack?’ The Jews in Palestine and around the world needed shock treatment—and it would have been worth the thirty comrades even if they had been needed in Palestine.”

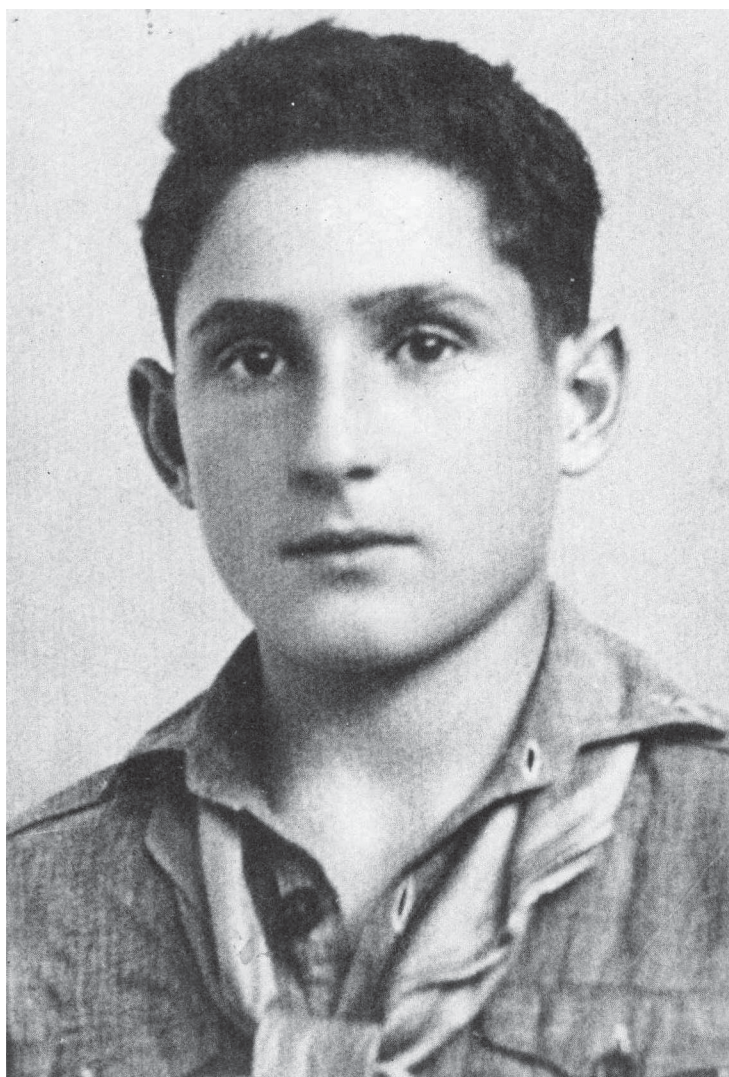
Don't you think there's something Bolshevik and twisted about this method of providing proof to the more naïve Jews in the Yishuv and in the Diaspora? In fact, we let the subject drop when you returned from Poland ...

“Ah, that's another matter. The problem is about repressing the immediate issue for the good of a more important goal; but ‘not urgent’? For that, I have no answer. For me, the issue of *aliya* for our comrades was ‘urgent.’ But for the three million who had begun to shed their illusions—someone should have paid attention to them ... and, yes—ignited the spark!”

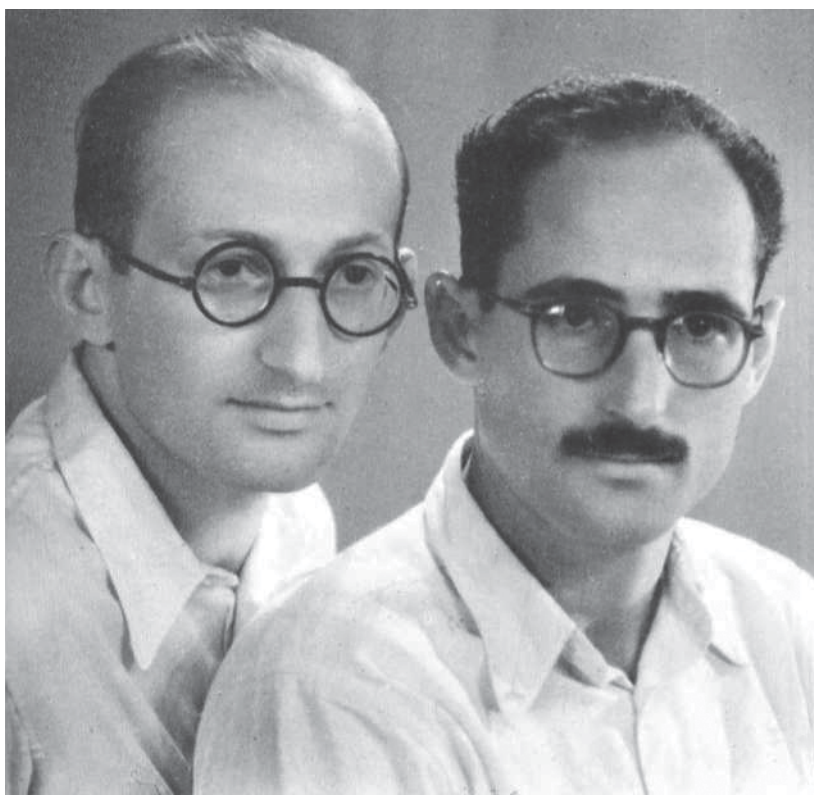
!a'gla, m'ila

אני מקוה שתקוץ אהבה על ראש אקססני כן
מסמכים לשם זה תשכיר את שני גלגלים.
עם ארבע חתימות, יאמר, וימסר - הוא מלימה
ח' וזרעו, וימלא, נרשם, אגודה על וכל.
שם על
והוא מלא.

2/11/2011



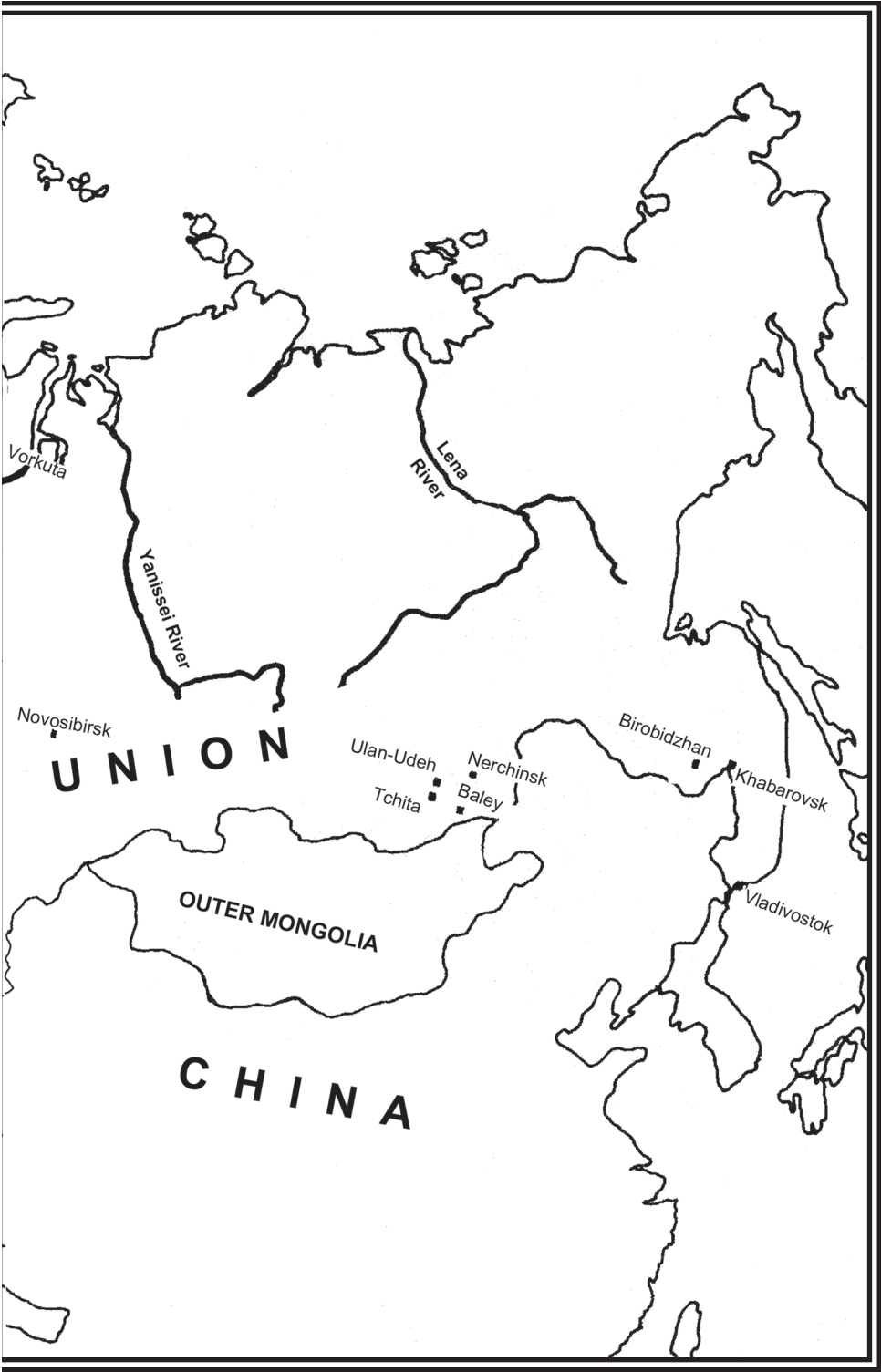
The young Mulka in the uniform of *Hashomer Hatzair* (*Netzach*), Riga



And the two went together – Mulka (right) and Yaka (Yacov Yanai), Vilna,
late 1944, just prior to their campaign



The Riga – Milan – Birobidzhan triangle – a map of the *bricha*



from behind the Iron Curtain, with Mulka's way stations

The Operation

Pan Yisrael Levy dozed in the carriage of the train leaving Warsaw to cross the Soviet border. With his erect stature and stylish suit, Pan Levy, about thirty years old, looked like a successful businessman who takes some care with his appearance. In Poland, private enterprise continued to flourish, and people could permit themselves to dress well. The slightly balding head, the eyeglasses, the alert and interested gaze—his entire appearance left no doubt as to his Jewish origins and suggested an intelligent man who had chosen the business world or perhaps had found a congenial spot in the higher echelons of the state bureaucracy.

Occasionally he glanced at his wristwatch. He seemed impatient.

At the border station, the Soviet officer checked the Polish document, scrutinized the photo and compared it with the bearer's face. The stamp from the Soviet consulate in Warsaw, permitting Citizen Levy to enter the territories of the Soviet Union and spend six innocent days in Vilna visiting his sick mother, passed muster. The officer countersigned the document, added the date—8 December 1945—and returned the document to its owner, then moved on to the next passenger.

A few hours later, Mulka left the train at the Vilna station. Beneath the false bottom of the suitcase he carried was a hundred thousand Złotys, a small sum in dollars, and a few gold coins. No one was waiting for him. Unhurriedly, he ordered a cup of tea from the meager offerings at the refreshment counter; sipped the tea; visited the bathroom. When he was sure no one was following him, he hired a taxi and drove into the city.

He had memorized the addresses of Yitzhak Rogalin, Mishka Levine and the Anouliks—Esther and Nissim. In the next few days, he would need to acquire an ID card and all the other documents a Soviet citizen must have. In the Soviet Union, no one walks around without ID papers.

Mishka and Yitzhak were Vilna natives and graduates of the Polish *Hashomer Hatzair*. Both had served during the war in the Soviet army and could speak basic Polish and Lithuanian and, of course, Yiddish and Hebrew. Yitzhak had already shed his uniform. Mishka was still wearing his army boots because he had no others.

* That night, four vehicles left. Three—which did not have our people in them—surrendered and the people were arrested. Our people, in the fourth vehicle, jumped out and dispersed in the dark. Some made it to the city and went underground; others went along the paved road, were caught, and were sent to prison with the people from the other three vehicles.

Their friends were already in Poland. Their leader Abba Kovner had gotten his fellows out of there, and evidently most of them were by now on their way to Palestine—possibly still in Poland, or possibly already in Italy. The two were delayed in Vilna because, being officers, they had been reluctant to desert in order to join their comrades. Desertion from the Soviet army—if not an urgent necessity—was undesirable. First of all, this was the army that liberated the surviving refugees and fought the Nazis. One developed a certain sentimental attachment to such an army. Secondly, desertion would trigger the interrogation of the deserters' known associates; many Jews still serving in the Lithuanian Division would be harmed, discipline would be tightened, informers would start sniffing around ... And mainly, why should they desert if demobilization was just around the corner anyway, and then their papers would be sent to the Soviet-Polish Repatriation Committee—and they would depart for Poland legally? Of course, if it became necessary to assist the fellows who were not Polish expatriates, well then! These two natives had good contacts in the city and in the unit in which they served. Seasoned young men, quick, committed, they got their bearings in a blink.

Likewise Esther and Nissim Anoulik. Esther had grown up in the Lithuanian city of Shavli (Siauliai), where she and her little brother Leibl had experienced the terrors of the ghetto. Their parents were killed. Both Nissim and his brother Benjamin were sent at the end of the war to the extermination camp at Klooga, Estonia, but they survived. Both of them, like Esther, were entitled to return to Poland. Esther, who had been a member of the Netzach movement as a youngster, was wholeheartedly devoted to helping Palestine-bound friends get to Poland.

Mulka wrote that Nissim was the chief accountant for the Lithuanian Railroad—a highly esteemed and powerful organization. With these new allies, Mulka next had to clarify the possibilities for getting out of Vilna and consult with friends about how to begin preparations. The Vilna people had advised Mulka to set up the headquarters for the *bricha* in their city, but to send people to the border from elsewhere—from small towns and villages that had Jewish residents. Vilna, he noted, was continually under ever-broader and more exacting surveillance by security agents, who inspected the trains leaving for Poland to discover Soviet citizens trying to get away, collaborators with the Nazis, people trying to move stolen property and capital abroad, and others of that ilk. True, Jewish strangers would be more conspicuous in remote villages and they would not know Polish, but in such villages it was still easier to grease the palms of clerks and also to hide families and individuals with farmers on a paid basis—until the next train departed for Poland.

Mulka tried to use the Polish Złoty he had brought with him as currency for these transactions—but who needed Złotys in Poland? When his people found money changers operating underground, they always gave extremely low rates for the Złotys. Mulka finally concluded that he would need to find some other

source of money until he could exchange the Polish money for Soviet money at a reasonable rate.

Mulka's people told him about a new way they had discovered to shorten the bureaucratic process of transforming a candidate for *aliya* into a "former Polish citizen." Under the Soviet-Polish Repatriation Agreement, signed not much earlier between the government of the Soviet Union and the government of Poland led by Wladyslaw Gomulka, any Pole or Jew (!)—but not Ukrainian or Belorussian—was entitled to return to Poland if they had been Polish citizens on September 1, 1939 with some kind of documentation in existence showing that they had lived in Polish territory at the time. In places where the registries had been destroyed during the war, one could renew one's registration—and, thus, substantiate the required facts—via the notarized testimony of two witnesses. And repatriation was also available for single men and women who married those with the right to return to Poland. Of course it was not easy to find "Polish" candidates for such matches, because the red tape was considerable and tiresome, and there was always the risk of an informant and the exposure of the marriage as fictitious.

His people told Mulka that, during the long December nights, a military truck would periodically leave a dark yard in Vilna, loaded with about thirty Jews making their way to the Polish border—a relatively short journey lasting about two hours; in the charge, it was said, of a Lithuanian army officer or someone pretending to be an officer but in any case able to speak Lithuanian, and the truck was a bone fide military truck. The vehicle with its human cargo would arrive at the Polish border, where for whatever reason there was no guard on duty at the time. The Jews would climb down and the truck would return empty, back the way it had come. Over the border, in Poland, the Jews would try to board the train passing nearby on its way to Warsaw. In the Warsaw environs, evidently, there was a training kibbutz whose role was to take in these refugees and give them guidance and instruction. The whole effort was somewhat dangerous. The routes to Poland were not free of Polish partisans who had fought the Soviets and the Polish authorities. A Jew falling into their hands was risking his life. But Jews were willing to risk it, and some succeeded in reaching their desired destination, and word had already come back from people who had taken that route and succeeded.

Of course, the truck driver had to be paid thousands of rubles personally on the spot, but it wasn't an outrageous sum under the circumstances. Officially the hundred thousand Złotys that Mulka had were worth about fifty thousand rubles, but no one was interested in Złotys, yet this was an opportunity not to be wasted. It was agreed that the Vilna people would handle this, and that Mulka meantime would go to Riga and try to change his Złotys there or get a loan against the funds they were promising to send him from Lodz. But Mulka could not be seen around Riga; too many people knew him there.

Ruth claimed, to anyone who asked her and wasn't "authorized" to know, that her brother was in Moscow and had evidently fallen for a lady there, Klava, or maybe it was Tanya, who knows; maybe he'd be back in a few days or weeks ... No, no, he wasn't writing from there, he wasn't much for writing ...

Rudya came to see me one evening. On the street, on our way to his house, he announced that Mulka was waiting for me there.

It was hard not to get emotional ...

There was so much to discuss with him. He was already "there," almost in *Eretz Yisrael*. What did he have to say, whom had he met, what was he carrying with him?

The debriefing was brief, stenographic. We skipped from one thing to another. I got operational information that I had to remember, I recorded addresses in code, I insisted on certain details. No, he had gotten only as far as Italy, but he had an answer for almost every question. Mulka spoke using words redolent of the past—certificates, Aliya Bet, Youth Aliya, emissaries' conference, training kibbutzim ... Good God, one could lose one's mind! It was all there ... one had only to cross the border! And the new terms he used—DP (displaced persons) camps, Cyprus, *aliya bet*, the *bricha* ... But who had the time to research modern Hebrew morphology or the emergence of new terminology unknown to our forefathers? Time was short.

Our "grandfather," Zalman Shalit, began working on changing the Zlotys into usable currency. Rozit, whose wounds were still raw and whom the doctors still considered a "nutcase," packed up his belongings after it was agreed that he would return with Mulka to Vilna and be part of the truck campaign; that was good. He was an orphan and had no one in Riga, and he had no arrangements to make at work. He was entirely free for *aliya*.

Meantime some friends from the Tashkent commune had arrived at the apartment: Yankel Hefetz, Isaac Katz, members of my family. There was suppressed emotion at my place; we talked in whispers. We had some work ahead of us.

I sat apart with Mulka in another room and we agreed on how I would handle getting the loyal members of the movement to Vilna and how the two cities would stay in touch (without using the mail service aside from the occasional telegram, employing words with double meanings). Via a few trusted members, I would have to find out when the others among my acquaintance were ready to set out, and I would have to explain to them what to take with them and what not to take, and how to disappear from their homes. And money, money! Every cent they could scrape together was important. I had to remember code words that Mulka had brought from Alexander, but they refused to stay put in my brain cells; I was not to "drag out" the process of sending candidates, but to send them promptly to Vilna after they were advised to start—and we had to assume that not all of them would keep quiet about it; some would tell people that they were

going to Poland illegally, so it would be better just to “hit” them or, in our picturesque jargon, to “hack their brains.” To come out shooting:

“You want to leave for Palestine?”

“When?”

“Tomorrow!”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, it’s tomorrow morning or never!”

This would help ensure that the candidate would be busy making essential arrangements and have little time to unburden himself to his best friend; no time for revelations about “it’s nothing important, really ...” and no chance for any hallelaloo; he would be too busy arranging for someone to jump the queue and get train tickets for the Riga-Vilna line and get the paperwork for a travel permit ...

Meanwhile I continue my studies with a final course at the conservatory, play Tchaikovsky, Brahms and Chopin, learn about polyphony and accompanying an ensemble, listen to lectures on the foundations of scientific Marxism and continue memorizing the impressive sayings of Comrade Stalin ...

My brain is required to absorb and to remember. Only crucial things are committed to writing, in code but in such a way that they sound logical if they are found, and the slips of paper are hidden in various places. This is nothing new. I’ve done all these brain calisthenics since the Soviets came to our places; no, actually since the stories of the Russian revolution, which moved me in a way that heroic literary tales did not.

Mulka and Rozit went to Vilna. A few days later we learned that Rozit had crossed the border safely. Our first one ...

I went to Ilka Zaiden, who was once my *madrich* (counselor). I had serious matters to discuss with him. Ilka had a sister, a war widow, and she had a daughter. All three of them could have left immediately, but ... the mother had a terrible ulcer and was nearly unconscious, poised between life and death. She could not be moved from her bed. It was clear to all of us that, under the circumstances, they could not leave. The difficult conditions en route, being continually on the move, without the slightest possibility of giving her proper care, meant that the entire family must remain where they were. Ilka would not leave them. The only possible solution—which was beyond human agency—was not discussed. We would have to wait, and wait some more. Perhaps time—days, or weeks—would rescue them from this trap.

Like the rest of us who were former Hebrew school students, Ilka too had friends among the Betar people. It was even logical that two old friends, who had once been in the same class, would meet from time to time to enjoy a glass of something and talk about this and that. The *Betar* guy prepared his people based on our guidelines, maintained contact with them, notified them when and

where to show up, so that I could notify the center in Vilna to meet them. This became the general practice; they, too, had to fit in with the overall flow, even if sent across separately, although we did not know all the *Betar* people, how trustworthy they were, their past history, so it was healthier if the activity involving them was run by them; only one of them—after I left Riga—would be in contact with the *bricha* center director in Riga, Ilka Zaiden.

I had no doubt that soon I would be moving on to Vilna.

After I met with the intended *Betar* coordinator and gave him the information on the departure and on contacting Ilka, I did not see him again.

Michael Bachmat was among the old-time members of *Netzach*. He had worked in eastern Latvia and had deeply rooted connections with the movement members there. We set up a meeting outside the city—it was better not to meet openly in the city too often, lest someone notice and put two and two together. I gave him the vital information he needed to operate properly thereafter. With Yekutiel Shor, communication was simpler: he had been an activist in Dvinsk and was also a student at the conservatory. We both registered for a course in ensemble performance which was required for all pianists and violinists. As a duo, we were entitled to a practice room with a piano in the conservatory building. Twice a week, during practice, we would hang a “Do not disturb—studying!” sign on the door and could consult uninterrupted about all our organizational matters and about candidates for *aliya* proposed by Yekutiel, while on the piano sat the score for a Beethoven sonata for violin and piano.

Occasionally, when we had time, we even played.

Isaac Katz had a serious problem. He was doing compulsory service in the “domestic armed forces,” i.e., the security services. If he deserted, they would search for him everywhere—starting with our apartment, my parents’ apartment, because he was registered as a subtenant there. Clearly, the apartment’s occupants would be expected to know what had happened to him and where he had disappeared to. They thought and thought and decided ... to kill him! Kill him? Yes. Death solves many problems ... Starting tomorrow, Isaac Katz will begin putting it out among his best friends in the prison camp that “she,” meaning his bride, has consented. He’s had enough of bachelorhood, spending a night at the prison camp on a bench, the next night with friends returned from Tashkent who are already crowded enough. He deserves a single-room flat—and he is sure they will allocate him one; to whom, if not to Isaac Katz, a soldier wounded in battle who continues to serve his motherland? He has also accumulated enough vacation days for a long holiday, and he is going to Tashkent to bring back his intended.

“Hey everyone, there will be a real wedding, with plenty of vodka!”

Everyone smiles. One of the women clerks looks abashed: there goes another one. What a shortage of men, after a war like that ...

I write in code, in a geography textbook, to Leah in Tashkent: “Prepare a death certificate in the name of Isaac Katz, his personal details you already know, cause of death and date, doctor’s signature and a rubber state stamp. And prepare a burial certificate, and when I tell you, send the two certificates in the name of the commander of the camp where Isaac was serving. As Leah, you will attach a heartrending letter about how your intended husband arrived and then died in a most untimely manner.”

Folks used to say of Tashkent that in the black market there, you could even buy an airplane. That was somewhat exaggerated. But a death certificate? Just a question of the price.

Yankel Hefetz was put in charge of liaison with Vilna. Until then, I was going three times a week to the terminal early in the morning, to meet the train from Vilna, and waiting for one of the crew who checked tickets. An older Polish guy who knew his way around, this conductor had a Herzl-like black beard and we called him “*Boroda*”—Russian for “beard.” Surviving on a train conductor’s pay was hard, and *Boroda* was looking for extra income on the side. He did a little profiteering here and there—buying leather in Vilna and selling it in Riga; buying tobacco in Riga and selling it in Vilna. Mulka had already been in touch with him and told him that he, too, was interested in business deals; Mulka’s brother in Riga could market goods that *Boroda* brought from Vilna and also supply the tobacco—why should he, *Boroda*, have to run around the marketplace? This way he would profit, and we would profit. Friends, like. Me, I’m not like the usual experienced dealer, and my eyeglasses made me conspicuous there at the station, meeting the train from Vilna. One day I told *Boroda* that the day after tomorrow my cousin would be waiting for him, and that henceforth Yankel would be doing the buying and selling in the markets. I told Yankel that I did not care if we lost a little on the transactions as long as the customer went away happy, because when he arrived he brought regards and a letter from Mulka’s “brother” ... Mulka also found a stand-in. Thus every two or three days, I would get coded information updates via *Boroda* and would give him my letter for the “brother.” Yankel was a specialist in small-scale profiteering. It seemed fair to assume that the authorities would not interfere with a disabled war veteran trying to add a few rubles to his meager military pension.

I sent details—still murky—to a few of our friends: “Something’s happening, someone arrived, I’ll update you later, meantime forget I said anything ... if I said anything. Nobody had been required to act yet, but a few words had alerted them to be ready.”

Former members of the movement had good discipline—it was in their blood. They read one another’s minds, with no superfluous questions; their lips were sealed; they waited for the appointed hour.

The cousin, the young mother, she knows. She and her husband are stuck where they are: they decide not to risk the fate of their newborn daughter who most likely would not survive the rigors of the journey without milk, without hot water ...

A talk with my father. In Tashkent, he and my mother went through the most difficult period of their lives, together with my friends. Both my parents greatly appreciated my friends' devotion and willingness to make sacrifices; they confessed to me that they did not believe I had such friends—but Mulka foremost. He was like a replacement—if such a comparison is even possible—for my brother who was killed. And now Mulka, too, is endangering himself ... and all of us.

My father and I talk privately. I've known for a long time that we needed to have a talk and that it was unavoidable.

"Son, I see what you are doing. I know that you are endangering yourself. And also Mulya. Maybe even others. Have you thought through what you are doing? About what could happen?"

"Yes, Dad. We've thought about it. And you know what conclusions we arrived at, and why Mulka came back."

"You remember the Afghanistan affair. We stayed alive by a miracle ... What are your intentions now?"

"Dad, Mulka came back to tell us that it is possible to get out of here and to reach Palestine ..."

"My son, your mother and I are not young. We're not strong any more. I don't even know if we can handle such a journey ..."

"We will do whatever we can to make it easier for you. You know how many of my friends love you both. For them, you are like the parents they have lost."

"Yes, that's true. You have very good and loyal friends. But the risk you are taking and the risk to us and to the child are also important. By some miracle, we escaped the clutches of the enemy Hitler, may his name be obliterated; are we and all of you destined, God forbid, to end our lives in one of Stalin's concentration camps? We have returned to our city. We have a roof over our heads. We are no longer facing utter starvation. Must we risk our lives?"

This confrontation was unavoidable. More than once I rehearsed what I would say, and not say—but when the moment came, I forgot all of it. I could not comfort him, I could not delude him or calm him. The thing was unbearably hard.

"Dad," I said, trying to control my voice, "I don't know if at some point we will regret our actions. Maybe ... but please, look at your grandson. That's what matters. Do you want him to grow up in this place, to go to school and be educated here? Does he have to stay here, in this country?"

I could not raise my eyes. I was afraid to look at my father. The silence was fearsome.

"We will go, son. We will go. And may God protect us ..."

One day in January 1946, Mulka received word of a failure which we called *der broch* (the fracture, or break, in Yiddish).

The disaster occurred on the night of January 5th, 1946.

After Mulka had telegraphed Alexander on “the birth of a son”—the agreed-on signal to those imprisoned—he composed a more detailed report and sent it to Lodz.

Don [i.e., Vilna] 15 January 1946

Dear Alexander,

I hope you received my telegram about the birth of a son, and now the details:

*The goy who was arranging things for us became overly ambitious and made an agreement with some profiteer and wanted to send some scalpers with our packages, so we postponed our shipment, but when things calmed down, we agreed that we would send only ours, because no one knew about ours [because while rumors were rife in the city about speculators, our people were underground]. But at the last minute, they paid the goy something and he, without our knowledge, sent some speculators along, too. In brief—there was a *zasada* [an ambush, in Russian] and they detained three full vehicles.* From our vehicle, they caught only 8 people; the others fled. One girl was killed. The goy, evidently, ran away to Tuvia [i.e., Poland]. Those are the highlights, because I’m in a hurry. We changed the roster of activists and now it’s very hard to work. Those of our people who fell into the trap know quite a lot, hence the danger is now very great for us, so long as they are still imprisoned. We have already managed to make contact with the authorities dealing with the matter and there is hope that we will be able to get them out, but it will require a lot of money. Aside from that, I think it is our duty to try to get them out; and we also have to do it because so long as our people are detained, we are completely constrained here, because they know us. We already have the beginnings of new routes, but of course that, too, involves considerable expense. If we do not immediately receive from you some 200,000 books, I don’t know what we can do here. Aside from that, I have a debt for Rivka [i.e., Riga] of 54,000 which I must send by the 20th [of January], because at Rivka everything is very well organized and some of our important people are sitting there waiting, and the money is taken from someone connected with us who helps us a lot. I still have no connection with Yisrael and right now this is very important—put him in touch with us immediately [and with] Yefim [Yaka] at Rivka. The address is: Sarkanarmias 22/16. Kasel for Yefim.*

At Don, the old address was burned [discovered and discontinued], and now the address is: Slutskaya 17/1 c/o Rachel Belitsky. Ask about Mischa (Rachel is completely marginal and doesn't know anything). The man going to Don with books was also sent to that address. In any case, send with detailed instructions, and the main thing is the books, because the incidental expenses are also very high, and the main thing is to keep the action going and get the prisoners out (if we can manage it). Send me our address in Berlin, in Danzig and warn them in Warsaw on Poznanskaya [Street] so that if (someone) comes in my name—they will send him to you and will help him. So, I await information and the books immediately. Lehitra'ot (we hope), Petras

And indeed, we had begun “on the wrong foot.”

Boroda brought a letter with Mulka's request that I come to him. Old Shalit, who was privy to everything, gave me an address in Vilna. It turned out that he had solved the problem of his own journey to Poland. From a relative who had already managed to cross the border, he got the address of Rivka and Michael Rafson in Vilna, both of whom were entitled to go to Poland. Rivka was a partisan during the war. Her husband Michael in those days was in the Soviet Union, and had recently returned to Vilna. Both of them had come originally from Jewish towns in Polish territory in the Vilna area. Zalman Shalit left Riga for Vilna and got in touch with the Rafsons, who “attached” him gladly to their family; the police registry clerk got his due ... and duly registered the old man as father to one of the couple. For the Rafsons, it was “love at first sight,” and they were thrilled to adopt their new “papa” and very proud of what they were able to do for him.

On January 18, I arrived in Vilna. Eight years earlier I had spent one day in the city, on my way with a group of movement members to a world camp of our movement in Czechoslovakia. At the time, I was depressed by the sight of terrible poverty of the indigent Jews of this city. After the war, ordinary scenes of poverty no longer moved me, but in Vilna, even more than in Riga, the destruction of a major Jewish community was clearly evident. On top of that came the fear and confusion following the imprisonment of some one hundred Jews caught in the vehicle transport debacle. Suddenly, every Vilna Jew you approached to ask directions to such-and-such a street, restaurant or shop, seemed to be trying to evade you, as if shunning contact with any stranger who might be a plainclothes policeman. One hundred Jewish prisoners! This meant that nearly every Jewish family in the city had a relative, a friend or an acquaintance in Lukiskes Prison.

I went to the apartment where they knew the whereabouts of Mishka Levin and, that same day, met Mulka and heard his own detailed account of the disas-

ter and his plans for the immediate future. The situation was dire, even critical. Among the prisoners were people with detailed knowledge of the *bricha* centers in Vilna.

Meantime, rumors were circulating in the city about stricter controls on exit permits, about additional arrests, about provocations by the regime. The upshot was that the underground could no longer operate with any safety in Vilna. We would have to start all over again—but under more difficult circumstances.

Don, 24 March 1946

Dear Alexander,

... We are now preparing new routes, but this is still going slowly, because there are no books. Routes can be found, but everything costs a lot, and none of our work is solid because there are no books. Otherwise we could start shipping again ... Would you please also send news of the situation in Palestine and in the movement in general, because I really lack any news here ... The Rivka people we will have to send via Yisrael [Kopel], but I still have had no contact with him.

Mulka never imagined that Kopel was still dawdling in Poland. Why was there no news of “Yisrael”? Was he already in Lvov?

If the route the vehicles had taken was “burned,” as they say in the underground, other ways must be found: by “marrying” young women and men to Polish partners; attempting to prove that someone in the family of a candidate for the journey was in Polish territory on the critical date; forging documents; finding a “green route,” which meant finding a route for crossing the border on foot; seeking out guides to take people to Sweden; checking the possibilities in the Lithuanian port city of Klaipeda ... and in addition to all that, it was necessary to find out what had happened to our people who had been caught—had they “broken” under interrogation, had they supplied names, what did the authorities know now, and how could the prisoners be rescued?

Mulka’s head was full of schemes worthy of a novel, but each had to be checked by his people. The sums required were astronomical, the risks undeniable, and the context for everything now was the disaster with the vehicles—which meant starting over, while anxiety mounted among Vilna’s Jews, who now worried that any talk of leaving for Poland must involve provocateurs and entrapment.

Mulka would not call it quits. So what if we had failed? Were we supposed to dismantle everything because of one failure? Never! But the effort needed to be shifted to other, smaller cities, because Vilna was dangerous now, even to Jews wishing to leave for Poland legally. Now everyone leaving Vilna had their papers checked more thoroughly; agents swarmed over every departing train, sniffing around, and Jewish agents were employed to check who was who among the travelers.

The disaster had energized Mulka. Full of fighting spirit, he wanted me to send him people immediately who could carry out his plans. Together we decided that I would return to Riga, give Ilka the necessary information and pass along the connections I had made for operational purposes, and then return to Vilna to work with Mulka.

In late afternoon I went to find the Rafsons at the address given to me by Shalit. Rivka Rafson's sister, who with her husband and their small daughter was also living in that apartment, welcomed me somewhat suspiciously. The ice was broken only when Rivka and Michael arrived—Shalit's reputation had preceded him.

Into the Rafson's tiny room had been squeezed a table which, when topped by a mattress, magically transformed itself into a royal bed.

We became friends. Until the day they left with "Grandpa" Shalit, Michael and Rivka Rafson helped Mulka and me in any way they could.

I am aware of continually having to inject the term "bribery," which must grate on anyone's ears in the context of the efforts to bring Jews to *Eretz Yisrael*, a thoroughly Zionist act which also had moral significance. In truth, even later on I will not be able to dispense with this term; it will appear throughout my tale like a black sheep.

... Would the priests in the Temple have acquiesced in the sacrifice of an animal with a defect? Would a sheep stolen from its owners and brought in the dark of night to the Temple Mount have been welcome?

After all, stealing is stealing and bribery is bribery. Right?

I've no choice but to provide a tedious explanation for the benefit of anyone unfamiliar with the Soviet economy. Two economies operate in the Soviet Union, side by side. One is open and above-board and works ineffectively even in normal times, while during wartime it becomes completely paralyzed, reduced to a mere "declaration of intent" (alongside declarations of equality for all nationalities and freedom of religious expression in the Soviet Union), so basically it does not function. The other economy, enabling life to go on, albeit austere and with shortages, is conducted under the table, governed by the iron law of supply and demand, not by any declared principles, and this economy continues operating no matter what, if not completely smoothly. Without this sub rosa economy, life would be impossible—and everyone in the Soviet Union knows that—but shhhh!—one mustn't talk about it. Theoretically it doesn't exist, and heaven help anyone caught being involved in it.

Under such circumstances, the more fastidious can ease their conscience in the knowledge that, without fudging things a bit, without "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" and "one favor repays another," or some actual inducement in hand, there is simply no way to obtain goods or services in the manner customary in well-run nations where rational economic rules and regulations prevail.

In the Soviet under-the-table economy, to which people are subject in their incessant struggle to survive, there is a market price for everything—and nobody looks askance when asked to pay it.

Only in places where the economy is run along rational lines, evidently, may people be expected to behave fairly in times of extreme scarcity. And conversely, in a place where the economy has lost all traces of rationality, the use of bribery as a form of alternative payment is unavoidable. Those who have never experienced it themselves should not judge people condemned to a life in that type of economy.

I went back to Riga. My first task was to send people to work with Mulka.

One of Ilka Goldberg's brothers was living at Kvutzat Kinneret (Israel) and another at Ein Gev (Israel). Ilka himself, who was about twenty-five, tall, with some kind of limp from a combat injury, cheerful, animated and sociable, impressed me tremendously—a young Russian who had appeared suddenly as if rising from the frothy waves of some magical tale by Pushkin. At the front, Ilka had learned more than how to fight the enemy. Four years in the army had taught him how to get by in all kinds of tough situations: how to escape when all escape is cut off; sensing when one can, or should, use a bit of impudence to put the adversary in his place; when to use humor to defuse tension; when to fix things by conjuring a bottle of vodka from one's satchel; and when to "blow their minds" with an offer they can't refuse.

We called him the *sheigetz* [Yiddish slang for non-Jew], and he really looked like a young Russian villager, his innocence camouflaging a mischievous craftiness and street smarts and a certain resourcefulness in gauging when things were not yet desperate ("the water is only up to our knees").

Ilka was one of the first to make his way in Belorussia, in territory that before the war had been under Polish rule and whence the trains now departed that were bringing repatriates back to Poland. In the small towns of Novoyelna and Novogrodok, Ilka found Jewish intermediaries who helped him turn Jews from Riga, Dvinsk and Shavli into villagers native to the area.

Also operating in that same area was Yisrael Friedman, a friend of mine and Mulka's from the movement in Riga. Because of an abdominal wound he sustained in combat during the war, he would grind his teeth and moan at night, but he continued traveling around Slonim, Horodyszcze and Lida looking for other temporary "places" for Jewish families and singles waiting in Vilna for the signal to cross the border.

These two were the first people I sent to Mulka.

The Shlomovitz family was one of the largest in our camp. The parents, who came from the small Jewish town of Rezekne, were religiously observant and lived a Hassidic lifestyle. I was asked to meet with the Shlomovitz matri-

arch, a bright and knowledgeable woman. I came to their house during the difficult period when the roads were blockaded. Aside from the parents and a son, Lesik-Eliezer, there were three girls in the house: Rivka, Dova and Esther. Waiting to emigrate were also Mother Shlomovitz's sister and her daughter. I went in and introduced myself as Katz. This was, of course, a cheap ploy, and I was punished: the woman fixed her gaze on me and dismissed me with the words, "So let it be Katz." I went straight to the point, explaining that at this time there was a possibility of moving only the girls across. We would try to arrange fictitious marriages for them to husbands with the right to repatriation. As for Lesik, the situation was still complicated and ambiguous. Sensing that from her standpoint it was more of a priority to get her son out, I thought to somewhat chill her enthusiasm for sending him at this very difficult time. I explained that sending men, at this juncture, was more dangerous, and that we needed altogether to proceed cautiously. I was hard on her: Was Mother Shlomovitz prepared to live in fear that her son may not have succeeded in crossing the border, heaven forbid? A long time would pass before she heard from him ...

"I imagine," I added, "that here in Riga, too, when Lesik is late coming home in the evening, you don't sleep. What will happen when he is out there somewhere and no one knows how long until you hear anything at all from him?"

The woman smiled. "All right, all right, Mr. Katz. You've hit the target. Since I can't sleep a wink when my son is late here, in Riga, I would like to see him over there already, on the other side of the border ..."

Lesik went to Vilna, to Mulka, and was sent to the small town of Globokoya to see what could be done there. Two of his sisters joined him on this trip, first Rivka and then Dova. Esther was still very young.

Together with the Vilna locals, a network of activists began to take shape and grow, and not long afterwards this activity began to bear fruit. The cart began moving, if awkwardly.

I began to be very busy, but for the sake of the conspiracy I continued with my usual routine: I visited the conservatory, pretended to seek work, and looked around for a piano. Malka, who worked in the Department of Abandoned Property at the municipality, supplied what I needed.

Meantime, I led a parallel life.

I advised my parents that I would soon be going to Vilna, whence an emissary would be dispatched to bring them to me, so that they could set out on the long and dangerous journey to Palestine with my sister and their grandchild—without me. No one in the family doubted that I would remain exposed to the risk of imprisonment, but Mulka's actions in returning to get us out—all of us, including them—prevented them from even suggesting that I go with them. What they

were feeling inside and what they were saying among themselves I could only imagine, with shrinking heart.

Ezra Guttman, one of Mulka's youngsters in the movement, we moved across with ease. Ezra was a demobilized soldier. We put him back into a uniform and moved him first to Vilna. Mishka or Yitzhak got him a blank military travel order, they filled in the details for a Soviet unit on duty in Poland—and off he went. On his way through Lodz, he stopped in at a hostel on Poludnyova Street, gave Mulka's note to Alexander, exchanged the uniform for civilian clothes and in short order set out again, westbound.

It would be easy to get Yochele (Yocheved), one of my movement's young people, out of her house. At least, that's what I imagined. Typically, she did not say much, and when she was offered the opportunity to go, she reported at once, without delay. Some twenty years later, she told me what she had not said at the time. She had a large family—a mother, and siblings ... Yochele disappeared one day from her house and vanished. Only once she'd crossed the border did she send her family word that she was all right.

"Why didn't you tell your mother?"

"I couldn't handle that. I was afraid that I would see her crying and change my mind."

One day I went to the train station early in the morning. The train from Vilna came slowly to a halt, puffing steam. A heavy solid object resembling a soldier, his head wrapped in a bloody bandage, fell on me and hugged me: "Yaka! Yaka!"

I tried to disengage from the hug and identify the new arrival. Leibleh! It was Leibkeh Lempert!—a good friend from our "company" in the movement—who had disappeared without a trace after passing through Tashkent on his way to the front.

In haste, I wound up my negotiations with *Boroda* and made time for Leibleh. What had happened to him, where was he wounded, where was he heading now, why wasn't he demobilized yet ... his replies clarified nothing. Leibleh had never been overly articulate. I suggested that he come home with me and, although he was supposed to continue on to Kirov, I did not have to beg him. At my house, he explained that he had a problem. In East Prussia, where he had been serving in a penalty outfit, he was driving a car on its way back from robbing the Germans and there was an accident; someone was killed—and suddenly he was in trouble. Now, injured, he was going to the military hospital at Kirov to get some distance from his unit ... avoid discovery. The story was confused. I looked at the documents. The form to send him to the hospital was faulty. Did anyone check the document? No, on his way from Kaliningrad he had eluded the checks, and a good thing, too. There was not a bit of logic in his "documents." Required details were missing.

"Leibl, are you really wounded or can you go on a mission?"

For a mission, Leibl was ready. He was in fact wounded, but not badly. I brought him to my house and looked over his documents again.

“Leibl, you’re not going to Kirov. Going to Kirov means getting arrested at the first document check. Would you like to go to Palestine?”

This was the “blow their minds” approach. Leibl restrained himself, but his eyes glittered.

“Is there a way? Of course I want to. When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Where to?”

“To Vilna.”

“OK. Who’s there?”

“Someone who knows you.”

Leibl became agitated and tried to guess who had arrived from Palestine, but I was immovable: “What’s the difference? Tomorrow morning go back on the same train to Vilna. You’ll get an address, and there you will be told what to do.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes. Now go to sleep. You need rest.”

The next day, Leibl went on his way, and met Mulka, who did not hesitate to use him first for another mission to me.

I was sure that, without the document and without a travel order, he would still have reached Kirov.



Early in February, two couriers came from Poland and brought money from Alexander. For a short while, things were easier for Mulka. It was possible to continue operating. Foremost was finding new routes:

“... The new routes have to be through the Prussian territories—as Mulka explained to Alexander in one of his letters—We had a meeting of the Rivka, Don and Tuvia people, and reached a decision that the plan has to change, because the work in Vilna has become very dangerous ...”

Mulka was afraid that the security services already knew about him and were looking for him, because it was only reasonable that one of the “disaster” prisoners had broken under interrogation.

“... It’s very important to me to leave Don, because one fine day they can make me have a son [to go to prison].”

Leaving did not work out. He sent couriers to various places and instructed them to look for ways to get over the border. Our consciences were burdened by the fate of our prisoners held in Lukiskes Prison (in Vilna):

... The prisoners' situation is pretty bad. There was a committee from Moscow, and the matter is serious, but we managed to work it out so that we can get information about them and in the next few days we will be able to make contact with them directly.. The question of their release is very difficult and possibly will happen only if, to start with, I have a sufficient sum (I imagine about 200,000) and even then I'm not sure that I can manage it, because in the department that handles them there is not a single Jew. I have not yet tried anything like this, because I did not have the means and I can commit to it only if the means are in hand ...

The means arrived ...

We decided a few days ago to go ahead with this operation.

For the actual implementation, Mishka volunteered, for among the prisoners from the vehicle debacle was a friend of his: the two had set out together on that trip. Perhaps from this friend he could get some kind of information about what the interrogators had learned and what they had not.

One of Mishka's old friends was a prosecutor with the security services, which is not surprising, since most of the interrogations were conducted to investigate Lithuanians who had collaborated with the Nazis, among them many who had Jewish blood on their hands. The Soviet authorities did not hesitate to exploit local Jews, who spoke Lithuanian, for interrogations of this sort.

Mishka's friend gave him his prosecutor's ID and told him how to behave, and Mishka went to the Lukiskes Prison. At the gate, he showed his ID and was admitted. Once inside, he directed a guard to bring his prisoner friend to him. One can easily imagine the prisoner's amazement when the two were left alone: the prisoner wondered fleetingly whether Mishka could have been an agent provocateur from the outset, when he brought him to the vehicle?

Mishka, in any case, hastened to reassure his friend, gave him cigarettes and chocolate and heard that the interrogator knew nothing about the connection between the prisoners and our organization. The two hugged, said their farewells, and Mishka ordered the guards to return the prisoner to his cell.

The tension in our room intensified. We sat waiting for Mishka's return, glancing periodically at our watches. We knew that if one of the prosecutors or interrogators chanced to visit the prison office, Mishka and the lender of the ID

would pay dearly. Finally he returned. Was it only my impression that Mishka's hands trembled? Or was it my own hands that trembled?

At the beginning of March, I took myself off to Vilna. Nechama and Bezalel Tau-man took me into their home, where I stayed a few weeks. The couple had married during the war, after their evacuation to the Soviet Union. Bezalel was a former resident of Poland. Nechama and her mother, who lived with her daughter and son-in-law, came from Shavli in Lithuania.

When war came, Nechama's sister was in Kovno with a newborn infant daughter, named Tikva. The new mother and her family were killed, but they managed first to give the baby into the care of a Lithuanian family.

When the baby's grandmother, her Aunt Nechama and Uncle Bezalel came back to Vilna after the war, they searched for and found Tikvaleh, now four years old. In her new home she had been called Teklita, and had been raised as a devout Catholic—knowing nothing of her real origins, of course. Now the child was obliged to become accustomed to a new environment and to the strange language spoken in her new household. Her grandmother and her aunt did not press her. Insofar as they could, they tried to allow her to go on behaving as she had in her adoptive home.

I did not speak Lithuanian, but the enchanting smile Tikvaleh gave me when I came to the house testified that my courting was not entirely in vain.

Every evening, Tikvaleh would turn to the wall, cross herself, fold her hands over her heart, say her evening prayers and ask the Lord Jesus to save her from the evil Jews ...

Isaac Katz left for his journey east with the maximum commotion. In a POW camp, his colleagues threw him a party, everyone drank vodka, and they wished him success in Tashkent where he was to go and fetch his intended bride. To make the long journey to Tashkent easier on their fellow security agent, the camp commanders gave him a security services travel order with the impressive heading "NKVD" at the top.

So Isaac Katz embarked for Tashkent on an official secret mission ...

Since it was also time for Zalman Shalit to go to Vilna and join the Rafsons as the "grandfather," I instructed Isaac to take him under his official aegis, that is, to sit there in his uniform next to the old man and make sure that no one bothered him en route—the old man was under NKVD supervision!

In Vilna, Zalman Shalit joined his "foster family" and we soon received a cheery telegram signed "Miraleh," signifying in this case not "little Miriam" but rather, in Yiddish, "all of us. [*mir alle*]"

One of the problems that Mulka needed to solve, the problem of his personal documents, was properly resolved when one of the young guys known to the

Vilna activists, Pinchas Dembovsky, who had only just been demobilized from the Soviet Army, gave Mulka his demobilization papers—which bore no photograph—and was helped across to Poland. Mulka-Pinchas Dembovsky went to the army demobilization office, submitted his papers from the army, and received new civilian ID papers, embellishments included. The new Pinchas instantly became Pavlik, as the Jews of Russia habitually gave a Slavic twist to a totally Jewish name, and this nickname stuck to him until his imprisonment. In this affair of his “civilianizing” complete with a permit to reside in Vilna, Mulka-Pinchas had to pull strings or bribe someone. Eliyahu Kroll, the Rafsons’ friend who served in the municipal police headquarters, arranged it without any trouble.

During this difficult period of limited options, crossings to Poland, and the anxiety about possible leaks from the interrogation of the captured vehicle passengers, Mulka and his friends found themselves called upon to cope with three particularly serious cases: deserter Leibl Lempert, who was being sought by an army tribunal; Isaac Katz, who needed to return on schedule to his base in Riga, or else be declared a deserter or AWOL and become the object of a search himself; and Yankel Hefetz, who probably already had a file with the Riga police due to his misdeeds as an habitual speculator and profiteer.

A feverish effort was launched to find a secure route for the three of them—and this time it was to be Kopel’s turn, in Lvov.

On February 1st, from Lodz, on the eve of his departure as an emissary, Kopel wrote a letter to Arie Ophir at Afikim (Israel):

... It’s been nearly two months since I arrived in Poland and all my time here has been devoted mainly to extricating our friends who are “there” and bringing them to Poland. Money problems are the reason why it is taking so long. While I was in Lvov, I learned of hundreds of Jewish children who had miraculously survived the slaughter and were living with non-Jews. The children must be exchanged for ransom and brought to Poland and from there sent to Palestine. Concerning the children, Leib Levy from Yagur has done important work here. In a few days I will be leaving to go back to where I came from when I came here to do this job; it is important to me that you know that Mulya Yaffe is also there working on something similar ...

... The schism in the party left a terrible impression on me and on other comrades. We cannot understand how, at a time when millions of Jews have been incinerated in crematoria, the party, the strongest force in Jewry, can arrive at a schism. I came from a country where a united labor party strengthened the victory of the country. Apparently, the disaster of our people wasn’t sufficient without also having

Financial report / 1 August (in thousands of books)			
Expenses		Income	
Deficit from 4 June	218	3050 visas	220
Package 20	30	100 “	7
“ without a number (child)	11	Aliya tax package 20	42
“ 24	45	“ “ “ “ “ 24	26
“ 25	30	“ “ “ “ “ 25	16
“ 26	8	“ “ “ “ “ 27	25
“ 27	21	“ “ “ “ “ 28	13
“ 28	25	“ “ “ “ “ 29	47
“ 29	33	“ “ “ “ “ 30	33
“ 30	27	“ “ “ “ “ 30	12
Travel to the north (Nehemia)	15	books for pack no. 20	45
Michael	20	“ “ “ “ “ no.9	6
[illegible] in Rivka	8	“ “ “ “ “ 25	6
For Kazan	2	“ “ “ “ “ 26	4
Funding for Michael's room	7	“ “ “ “ “ 27	13
Collecting advance payments	13	“ “ “ “ “ 28	10
Discharge from the army	7	“ “ “ “ “ 29	67
Papyrii	9	“ “ “ “ “ 30	<u>35</u>
Purchase of gold coins	6		676
Activists' funding	60		
Local housing for packages	25		
Support for packages en route	20		
Storage of packages and activists	36		
Travel and scouting the routes	30		
For the authorities	8		
Housing	<u>6</u>		
	<u>732</u>		
	<u>626</u>		
Deficit 106			
=====			
Translated from the original (handwritten) Hebrew			

this schism and being obliged to mend it ... I believe that our comrades will find the right way to help in this regard ...

On February 17, Mulka wrote again to Alexander and described the situation:

... I already wrote you that here at Don the situation has become very difficult. One man's price [for crossing the border] is now about 10-12 [thousand rubles] and it takes 5 people a week of running around to get [it] organized ... So we have decided to focus our attention on the smaller towns. But yesterday we learned that this doesn't resolve the issue. Shipment number 5 [a group of people] departed, and is sitting with some farmers and there is a danger that it won't be able to leave [from the village, for Poland] because Jews rarely leave from there and the whole enterprise is very dangerous. My shipments from Barka [Brest] and Yisrael [Lvov] have not yet returned ... I think that I should leave Don as soon as possible, because I can no longer walk around outside during the day. Likewise in Rivka [Riga] the authorities have started to take an interest in me, and I could give birth [be arrested] any day now. But I repeat that unless someone comes here to replace me, I can't and won't go anywhere. In Rivka the situation is about the same with Yefim [Yaka]. He's already too visible to the creatures there and he should relocate. He has someone there to take over for him. Generally the shipments there are well organized ...

On February 10, Kopel—coming from Lodz, in Poland—arrived at Lvov in the Soviet Union. Mulka was greatly relieved. From Kopel, he in turn heard about the 300 “papyri”—exit permits to Poland—which the head of the community was holding for Kopel's arrival. These promised to be an ideal solution to the troubled situation in Vilna. Thenceforth Vilna acquired the role of way-station for those leaving from Riga, while the actual exit was via Lvov—using Polish exit permits.

Vilna needed to get the signal from Lvov that the route was open. Time passed, the signal did not come, and the tension in Vilna increased.

Kopel recounts it:

Mulka left for Vilna before me ... and those were the instructions: Until I notified Mulka, and he me, that everything was all right, and that we could receive people—we would not send anyone to each other for transport across the border nor would we telephone to one another, but would use couriers ... The rule was that when we came to a place, we had to first get things organized, from a legal standpoint. Only after that, when things felt okay, would we start operat-

ing. And another thing: I had clear instructions—I don't know about Mulka—that if any sort of catastrophe happened and we got into trouble, it was absolutely forbidden to say that we were Zionists, or emissaries. In such circumstances we were to say that we were speculators, or thieves ... anything but to say that we belong to some kind of political organization. Zvi (Alexander) already had experience in Russia and he said that everyone had a chance there to get out of jail only if he wasn't political. Theft and murder could be pardoned, but a political crime could not! Those were my instructions. I'll come back to this subject again, because I didn't follow orders. ... I had a list of several hundred addresses. When I left, I had a thousand dollars and some evacuee forms which had to be checked to see if they conformed to the ones in Lvov. What papers was I given? In Poland there was a member of Hechalutz, Gersh (Hirsch) Shmuelevich Morbachik. He had been a soldier in the Red Army and been wounded, and as a Polish citizen returned to Poland ... No, I did not know him. The data on the ID papers matched more or less, but there were some things that did not match. For instance, he had been severely wounded and this was recorded in his army papers. There was no X-ray, which was good. I gave up my own ID papers for Morbachik, so he became Kopel Skop, and I—Gershon Morbachik ...

From Alexander and other activists in various factions in the Hechalutz movement, Kopel received names and addresses of members who were still in the Soviet Union. He was supposed to take care of those, too, but Kopel notified the heads of the *bricha* movement in Lodz that he was interested mainly in two areas of action—Holocaust orphans and his friends from Latvia. Of course, insofar as possible he would help anyone who wanted to get to Palestine.

Alexander instructed Kopel not to begin operating in Lvov until he had legal status there. In other words, he had to get civilian ID papers, soldier's ID papers, and a *propiska*. Meantime, he had given his own original documents, in the name of Kopel Skop, to a certain Jew for safekeeping, before his departure to Poland. Now he got these papers back again, not having gone to Poland at all, but he had no *propiska* for Lvov, and in order to register himself there—in his “alleged” residence—he had to pay a five thousand ruble bribe. This was a large sum to “organize” even for people earning a high salary of 200 or 250 rubles a month, but who in the Soviet Union lives solely on their salary? And what, after all, was five thousand rubles in the unofficial currency market in those days? Twenty-five dollars! Kopel had brought thousands with him in his pack.

Kopel, however, faithful to his education in the movement, rejected black market calculations; speculators and corruption in general infuriated him, so

he decided to look for less costly ways to reduce the damage to the public coffers, and began negotiating with the head of the community and other figures so as to promote progress toward his goals.

... The Jew from whom I rented the flat promised to help me arrange the transfer of the children. He had to leave immediately for the monastery. I met with the head of the community, there were meetings at his house, we made plans with him ... And another thing: with all due respect to him, he wanted to know how much money I had brought with me and what I had and did not have, and I did not want to reveal my cards. I explained to him that the problem was not financial—that a moral obligation was involved, and he needed to act whether I had money or not, and all those arguments—whether I should organize the work on a financial basis or a public basis ... I wanted him to see this as a national civic mission, not a money matter. I said: you must help me—even if I don't have money.

During his “educational” work with the head of the community, Kopel generated a circle of local activists, with whom he had no such arguments. Among the members of this devoted group of graduates of various movements were Avraham Esset, Yehoshua Frankfurter, Zalman Shinberg and Yosef Neiman. Kopel had already sent an emissary to the monastery where the orphans lived, and the *propiska* matter was repeatedly postponed.

And then our three “refugees” descended on Kopel—Isaac Katz, Leibl Lempert and Yankel Hefetz. As if he didn't have enough problems already ... but when he heard that Leibke had deserted from the army and risked a death sentence if caught, Kopel's efforts went into high gear.

True, Mulka was supposed to wait until he got the go-ahead from Kopel that it was all right to send him people to be shipped across the border into Poland, but even though Mulka clearly understood that Kopel had not finalized arrangements for his legal status, Mulka did not view that fact as sufficient reason to postpone sending those three: “legalization-shmegalization,” rules may be rules, but operationally you had to use your brain and deal with the constraints of the moment—at least, so reasoned Mulka. He himself was “not legal” for a long time. Had he postponed his work on that account? Mulka had never even considered that \$25 would cause Kopel to postpone registering his residence in the city, or that he had commenced the ethical instruction of the head of the community who, however touched he was by the distress of those children of the Holocaust, craved to know what financial resources this emissary had brought with him.

Shmuel Yaffe, son of an industrialist and businessman, had no doubt that the

money was meant for a sacred purpose, but he also knew that not all the “partners” with whom he was working would relate to money with the same indifference ... When word came from Poland that Kopel had already arrived in Lvov, Mulka sent Isaac and Leibl to him, adding Yankel Hefetz as a kind of bodyguard and chaperone.

... I had an argument with the head of the community over a few hundred evaculists costing this or that sum—and now here I am asking for two or three ... I did not want to. So I looked for ways to get the necessary papers and send the three on their way. I completely forgot about myself and my legalization process, and began running around to organize the immediate task ... I had Zeama’s address and I thought that maybe he could give me a few exit permits. I went to Avraham Esset and we went to Zeama together. Our usual method was for Avraham to go into the house first and if everything was okay, I would go in after him. When we got to Zeama’s house, Avraham told me to wait: He would go inside and check that everything was okay, but I told him: If it’s dangerous, why do you always have to be the one to go in first, and not me? So this time, of all times, we went inside together. We had barely opened the door when we were told: “Hands up!” and we were immediately searched. Zeama had already been taken from the house and detained, and everyone who entered the apartment was arrested ...

If it’s dangerous, why do you always have to go first, and not me? Why? The IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) later reduced this to a single word: “*Acharai* [follow me]!”

Zeama’s apartment became a trap for anyone who entered it. None of those detained knew what they might be charged with or why the apartment’s owner had been taken away to wherever he’d been taken. Evidently someone had informed on them, a common enough occurrence ... When they patted Kopel down, they found a letter from Poland and a photograph—“exhibits” without a shred of importance.

Sitting in the room were two men and a woman from the NKVD and about ten detainees. Two of them were known to Kopel—David Pomerantz and one of the emissaries from Poland, who went by the name “Misha,” who roamed around in the uniform of a *strashina* (sergeant-major) with a pistol in his belt. These two, of course, knew who Kopel was, but they gave no sign. The interrogators asked the detainees why they had come and received nearly uniform replies: They had heard that the apartment would be vacant and available for rent. This was a very reasonable reply, as the housing crunch in the city was severe.

All the detainees were directed to sit and wait. Why, and for whom? No one asked; when people in the NKVD uniform give an order, one obeys. The guards brought food and the detention wore on into the night; meantime, within the apartment, the detainees were able to talk and to move from one corner to another.

Kopel knew that if they began interrogating him, there would be trouble: "In what unit did you serve, Citizen Morbachik?" "What was your commander's name, Gersh Shmuelevich?" "You forgot?" "What do you mean, forgot?" "Shall we refresh your memory for you?"

But Kopel, David and the "strashina" found an opportunity to talk amongst themselves and concluded that they were in serious trouble and had better get out of there somehow. The three of them slowly began moving, separately, closer and closer to the veranda where they sat on the floor, but there were a few Jews in the room who had come to Zeama completely innocently and they began signaling to the comrades not to do anything foolish that would complicate things for them, who were innocent of anything ... After nightfall, one of the guards came in, stood next to the terrace and ordered the three to move immediately to the other side of the room.

The plan to jump from the third-story veranda was discarded.

... In the middle of the night, I think it was about two A.M., some senior NKVD officers arrived and asked each person his name. Then most of the people were released. They took the strashina and me to prison. David, if I'm not mistaken, was released for a day and then arrested again. And another woman, with no connection to us, was also taken. They brought us to the district offices of the NKVD—an enormous house! Once upon a time it was the Gestapo headquarters. Now, in the middle of the night, it was full of clerks. You would never have known it was night-time. The corridors were full. "Sit on the floor," they told us; we sat. Sixteen days had passed since I'd come to Lvov from Poland. We sat on the floor for some hours. Then I was called for questioning. They asked me a few routine questions: What's your name, and so forth. Evidently it was now early morning, five A.M. maybe. In February, it's still dark at that hour. Then I was called again, this time to a different interrogator, who demanded that I recite my life history. I recited. Then another walk through the corridors, another interval sitting on the floor and then, once again, a different interrogator and "tell me your life story!" So I recited it again, about Gershon Morbachik—my life history was all ready, there in my head. "I came back from Poland because I have a sister here and she is in a kolkhoz named after Lenin in the Tashkent district. I am on

my way there.” The next day, we sat on the floor all day. Again called for questioning; the same questions. Night fell. I understood that the situation was deteriorating. The questions became increasingly basic. Where is David? I don’t know. I’m sitting in some kind of office on the floor, and waiting. During the night, they call me again. A large room. The strashina is sitting there. I wanted to approach him, but the interrogator-lieutenant prevented me. “No talking!” After a bit, the lieutenant dozed off and I tried once more to approach the strashina but the lieutenant prevented it once again. But then I saw—or maybe only imagined—that he really had fallen asleep. Then the strashina said to me: “You know what? I think I’ll get out of here, get out of this whole thing. I was questioned and everything was okay.” And I tell him: “If you get out of here, then flee to Poland; save yourself.” And he said to me: “No, I won’t go until I can get you and David out of here. I’ll stay here.” And I argue with him and tell him that it’s not necessary, that he can’t help us with anything, that if he gets out he should go immediately to Poland and explain to them there what is going on. The first time I had met him was at Zeama’s house. I tried to persuade him that he should go to Poland right away. Finally he said to me: “You know what? I haven’t a penny. How will I get to Poland? I won’t be able to. Tell me what to do.” Now I started to have doubts and didn’t know what to decide. There was this suitcase with money in it, and some of my money was with Yosef Neiman. And then he said: “Advise me. You say to head straight for Poland. I have no money. I want to stay here and help you.” I’m wondering what to do ... and he asks me, “Where is your suitcase?” No, I did not give him my suitcase; I did not tell him where it was. But I told him that he could go to Yosef Neiman and ask him for ten thousand rubles. Then he said to me: Yosef won’t believe me, he doesn’t know me ... ”

Kopel, Kopel, you innocent—what are you doing?

Even now, I jump up and try to stop you. You don’t even know the man! And when have you ever seen an interrogator fall asleep while two prisoners are in the room with him? Is every “emissary” like a pale blue *tallit*—spotless? Is everyone a *tsaddik* [righteous]? Don’t you even consider that this might be the sort of provocateur familiar to anyone who knows anything about Russia? The man who “sells” his buddy and saves his own skin? Kopel, don’t tell him anything he doesn’t know ...

We are all wise in hindsight ...

In Kopel’s pocket he had a fountain pen he had received from an American friend

in Poland. Everyone who had seen this fountain pen in Yosef's house was amazed at the wonders of American industry. Kopel gave the *strashina* the pen so he could show it to Yosef, to prove that the two had really met.

Think, Kopel—think about what you are doing!

The two separated and the *strashina* was soon taken from the room. Kopel did not see him again.

And then Kopel's interrogation began. And what an interrogation ...

In Vilna, we had no idea that Kopel managed to be in Lvov a mere two weeks before being "burned" without having had a chance even to start his work. Later on we actually heard that things were going well with him.

On the day of Kopel's and David's interrogation by the NKVD in Lvov, Mulka wrote to Alexander:

... I made contact with Yisrael. They still have had no opportunities, but hope soon to make a shipment from there.

Once we found out what had really happened there, we naturally had to cease shipments to Lvov. On the other hand, things were moving ahead around Vilna. "God does not punish us with both hands," as our grandmothers used to say.

... We moved the departure points to the smaller towns. After weeks of searching and a substantial expenditure of money and effort, we were able to create a few such opportunities.

After the disaster of the vehicles, which loomed so large when viewed from Vilna's perspective, the progress made seemed worthy of praise.

Mulka and those assisting him redoubled their efforts. In January, following the vehicle disaster, and in February, thanks to the investment of great effort, seven people were shipped; in March, 22 people!

Ilka Goldberg—"the *sheigetz*"—Lesik Shlomovich and Yisrael Friedman worked day and night clearing routes. Each of them had his own stratagems for cementing ties with local bosses or intermediaries—"machers"—and persuading them to help Jews get away if it was made worth their while to assist.

Usually the intermediaries were local Jews, with whom our emissary had no trouble taking the role of "a boy from a good home" who wanted to make a little money before moving on to Poland himself, and who was therefore engaged in "pushing" friends or relatives there who would pay a suitable sum for the necessary travel services.

The “end product” of this commerce with *machers* was the evaculist—a transit permit for Poland. This document was issued by the Soviet-Polish Joint Commission established to deal with the repatriation of former Polish citizens to their homeland; this commission handled basic principles involving population exchanges (Belorussians and Ukrainians from Poland to the Soviet Union; Poles and Polish Jews from the Soviet Union to Poland). The commission set up local subcommittees with members likewise representing the two countries; these had exceedingly broad authority regarding the right to repatriation and their administrative staffs, unsurprisingly, felt that the time had finally come to line their own pockets.

Many candidates for repatriation, whose right to return to Poland was beyond any doubt, nonetheless lacked one or more of the various documents required. During the war, many archives were either destroyed or simply mismanaged by clerks who couldn’t tell left from right. Meantime, many people’s personal status had changed: people still got married, had children, and divorced; children were left without parents. The confusion was massive. All the problems wrought by war and forced evacuation required some kind of bureaucratic solution, but the clerks who were supervising this process were not especially well-trained or conscientious.

Anyone needing verification of their claims, anyone searching for proof of their right to be repatriated to Poland, knew that their affairs would not progress without something paid under the table—cash, alcohol, services rendered, scarce goods obtained, strings pulled somewhere.

Our people found ways to arrange the kinds of transactions common in those days in the Soviet Union. More than once we had to supply a key clerk or intermediary with cash, not in rubles but in dollars; one person would ask for gold coins, another would be satisfied with vodka, either ordinary or superior. Any scarce commodity could function as currency: cigarettes from Moscow; strong drink attainable in Riga; dress fabrics from Leningrad ... Sometimes we had to send a special courier in quest of the required items. We were in regular touch with money changers—underground, of course.

These efforts were part and parcel of the operating costs, as we used to say, for this complicated system that we were obliged to set up and maintain.

Over time, our emissary developed direct connections with the repatriation bureaucrats themselves, both Polish and Soviet. This facilitated faster results but was also riskier. Our young men (and women) proved themselves canny traders, displaying only a reasonable interest in enriching themselves a little when the opportunity arose—without the least whiff of anything “political.” Their trading partners invariably wished to stay away from “politics.”

Generally, each of our people succeeded in their own way: the “*sheigetz*” used his personal charm; Lesik was the seasoned, soft-spoken deal-maker; Yisrael ce-

mented friendships using a bottle of vodka and stories authentic or otherwise of deeds done on the battlefield or elsewhere, recounted at length into the wee hours.

We tried not to have any one person working in the same place for too long. After someone had been replaced in the field, he got out of there himself and went to the *ma'on*.

Shipping the “packages”—groups of people leaving for Poland—involved a great deal of work. Firstly, coordination was required: We had to bring people singly and in families to Vilna from Riga, Dvinsk, Kovno and smaller villages, and everyone had to have a valid travel permit. We kept the passengers in Vilna until we could send them to a village where they could board a train bound for Poland; our couriers also awaited them there with the various documents they would need. We had an interest in minimizing the waiting period for these “packages,” insofar as possible, whether in Vilna or at the departure points in the villages—due both to the risks they faced in these new and unknown places, and to the sizeable costs incurred in boarding them there. We had to supply safe houses, mislead the neighbors, avoid using the same residence for too long. Comrades who lived in Vilna would go to the train station and bring the new arrivals to somewhere safe, instructing them to remain there quietly until departure time. It was important to instruct the passengers how to behave on the train, to find excuses for their poor command of Polish and their presence in that particular place, etc., etc. They had to be coached on how to behave at the border while their luggage and their documents were inspected. Sometimes we would pre-check passengers’ belongings and disqualify a document, a photo, even personal objects liable to suggest that they were not former residents of Poland. And we had to supply them with additional documents, aside from permits to cross the border; the Soviet bureaucracy demanded all kinds of things, including a certificate of cleanliness from a bathhouse.

Our busy runners, men and women, would report early in the morning to notify the operational headquarters whether one of the couriers had arrived in Vilna and whether he should take the “package” to the train that same day. We had to align our schedule to that of the trains entering and leaving from the passengers’ various points of departure along the route to Poland. When a courier showed up in the morning, declaring that he must return within a given number of hours with this or that number of travelers of specified ages, the runners, alarmed, would rush to the safe houses—as instructed by headquarters—to bring the appropriate people straight to the train station. At the train station, we had “friends” who, in exchange for a given sum in rubles, would provide train tickets—a necessity that was hard to obtain at the ticket office. Our courier would arrive at the last minute so that he would not spend any unnecessary extra time

at the station, and would embark with his “package” for the designated interim destination, where he had to hide the “package” people—in a room or a house, sometimes a storage barn—to avoid their wandering around idly and attracting the attention of curious locals. When arrangements were finalized with the Repatriation Committee’s representatives and it was time to board the train for the border, the courier would give final instructions to the “package” people, take their Soviet documents, give the new Polish documents to the heads of their (fictitious) “families,” tell everyone their new names, explain which of them was a relative of whom—and put them aboard the train.

During the morning, between the arrival of the emissaries in Vilna with information about the people they had brought for departure with the current “package,” we at headquarters had to prepare the letters and notes for the *ma’on*, explain to the leaders of the departing groups what they would need to do on arriving in Poland, give them the addresses in Lodz and explain about the telegram they were to send to Vilna and in whose name, to advise that the “package” had arrived safely.

From the time these people departed until the emissary returned and made his report to headquarters, we were all in an agitated state of anticipation. The only thing that could remedy this was the telegram from Poland, confirming that the passengers were safe.

In addition to all of that, we had to work diligently to organize safe houses, exchange currency, keep up contacts with the other places, find new ways to get people across the border, get people out of jail, prevent failures, and organize special projects, foremost among which was to clarify what had happened in Lvov.

It was March 13 before Mulka advised Alexander at the *ma’on* that a catastrophe had taken place in Lvov:

First, I must tell you that Yisrael [Lvov] has given birth to a boy. I don't have details yet—it may be entirely coincidental, but it may be more serious than that. Due to their negligence I still don't have an address there, but even so, I am sending someone there to look into the situation. Unfortunately I cannot leave immediately myself, because at the moment I am turning over other things at Don to Yefim from Rivka who has come to replace me, because it is already absolutely the last moment for me, too, to move on from here; and the second I am done with things here, I think I will go to Yisrael.

Five days later, Mulka sends another letter, more precise: The emissary Zhenya Kless, who left Poland on her way east, and another emissary, who evidently was intended for Vilna—Yerachmiel—were arrested. Both of them were detained for

a short time in Lvov after their arrival from the *ma'on*. Although Zhenya had changed her identity, the interrogators knew immediately who she was; her suitcase, packed for a trip to the east, i.e., to Tashkent, with addresses, instructions, and money, was also taken. It was unclear whether the suitcase intended for us was also now in the hands of the NKVD. The agents knew all our ruses: they looked for notes hidden in toothpaste tubes, money under the soles of shoes, etc.—yet our people in Lvov still managed to rescue 300 “*stefanim*” (dollars). Apparently the snitching was done in Poland or else there was an informer among us in Lvov. Mulka mentioned the name Strashina as suspect. Kopel, Avraham, and others (not all the names were known to us) were arrested. The money that Kopel had brought from Poland was in friendly hands, but it was doubtful that we could get it right away. And Mulka added that he could not verify everything he was reporting, noting that “all of this is third-hand information.”

And his conclusions:

We think that a shipment should be sent from here to Yisrael [Lvov] and that they should be helped to get their people out [of jail]. I intend to go myself, with some other trusted and capable guy from here. The east (Tashkent) should immediately be notified that all the addresses they gave to Zhenya are in the hands of the authorities ...

And since we suspected that the source of the leak was in Lodz or else a knowledgeable informer, with suspicion intensifying that the Strashina was the villain, we decided to change the nicknames: Mulka was no longer Petras, but Chava; Yaka went from Yefim to Lenina; Zvi, from Alexander to “Nikolai 102.”

Why did Zvi-Alexander get the suffix “102” for his “Nikolai”?—Someone persevering will figure out that the numeric equivalents of the Hebrew letters for “Zvi” add up to 102.

It is doubtful that the complex phrasing of “if there is a risk, why do you have to go first and not I?” was to Mulka’s taste. Renouncing a more elegant description of the essence of leadership, Mulka nominated himself for the role of investigator in Lvov, thereby preventing others from volunteering or even conducting a discussion on the subject. There was, however, no shortage of volunteers—Kopel was admired by everyone who knew him—but the job was already taken.

Theoretically a military leader ought to stay behind the lines and not charge ahead of the troops into the line of fire, since if he stands at the head of his command he exposes himself to risk and certainly cannot observe the entire battle and see what is happening among the forces behind him. Right? Well, it’s true for a battle between legions. Our war was a struggle between individuals, sometimes small cells, and in such circumstances the leader is nearly always exposed to his command: If he trails behind them, he won’t be their leader for long. In the situations we were facing, the leader had to prove every day—either by acting or being

prepared to act—that everything he suggested could in fact be done, and that he, the leader, was ready to risk himself and prove it. Only then would you, the fellow from the ranks, also endanger yourself, unless you were an irredeemable coward.

These things are well known. A personal example is decisive. The individual comrade from the ranks must know that whatever he can do in the struggle, his leader is willing and able to do, too.

More than once I heard Mulka declare defiantly, “If anyone can do that, then I can, too.” Or, “If somebody—then why not me?”

Mulka loved danger. If someone were to tell me now that nobody loves danger as such, I would point to Mulka, who seemed to need to experience danger periodically, to grapple with it, to challenge it.

And facing danger, he was at his best.

Shlomo Gefen was among the *Betar* old-timers in Vilna.

He was working in his profession—in a medical laboratory—but Mulka presented him to me as someone who had once been a key member of the Lithuanian *Betar* organization, whose name he had already heard back in Italy.

Mulka—under the framework we had set up in Riga—did not want to deal with every *Betar* person singly; since among our people there was no one who knew the *Betar* people well, he preferred that Shlomo—whom we knew—be the “pipeline” to them. Thus, every which way, the rules of secrecy were breached.

So a simple set-up was arranged with Shlomo: When he had a candidate for crossing to Poland—a single, or head of a family—he would let us know and clarify how we should get in touch with him. One of our people would contact him, set up a tentative exit date, brief him, collect money from him—if he had any—and the man and his family would be sent with one of our “packages.”

It was also agreed that if the *Betar* participation were to grow, we would ask them to give us local activists to help clear routes, maintain contact, provide overnight accommodations and so on.

Ostensibly this was a reasonable agreement, which ought to have worked, and in fact no problems arose in our contacts with Shlomo, except that he recommended no candidates for crossing to Poland, and all we heard from him was postponements, excuses, or “I wasn’t able to make contact” ... When now and then we wanted to send across one of “theirs”—generally based on a recommendation from one of our Kovno people—they could not remember the name. Why?

Finally Shlomo sent us a young man who actually seemed fit for action. When he was given a specific mission, he did fine. We thought to keep him in that role, but it turned out that he had a wife and a baby. Since in those days we generally did not put at risk a family with a young child—if the parents were caught and arrested, where would they find the baby later on, even if they survived?—We sent that family to Poland on an upcoming shipment.

Again we had meetings with Shlomo: How are things? What's happening? The replies were limp, and he had no people for us.

About a quarter of a century later, I got an explanation, in my own home, from the new immigrant himself:

"Shlomo, why did you not make aliya via our network? Why did you not send your people to us?"

"I got an order not to cooperate ... "

In 1947, Shlomo Gefen was sentenced to ten years of forced labor.

Who was the prick giving those orders? Barely recovering after the Holocaust and sending an instruction like that to Shlomo!

How is a financial transfer made?—How does a normal person give you a lot of money in exchange for a slip of paper with a few scribbled numbers and Hebrew letters that mean nothing to him?

First one must find the big fish, whose paunch is extended by too much money which he is afraid to try to carry over the border; not that he has told many people that he, So and So, possesses such and such an amount of rubles or the equivalent, money made in questionable enterprises or earned in prohibited ways ... No, these days no one is that gullible: He has people he trusts who believe us, and it's mutual. Now the loose ends can be tied up.

For example, let's say we exchanged some currency with a certain money changer, who had come to know that Mulka and/or I are a "reliable firm," as trustworthy as the Bank of England, and that we don't pass along financial secrets to third parties, no matter what; and let's say some unidentified Jew with money who is a candidate for crossing to Poland, is not sleeping nights while trying to figure out how to get his money across the border as well—at that point our money changer, whom this man trusts, can talk to him more or less in these words: "Why should you wrack your brains when there's good advice for you which I, whom you trust, am prepared to give you? There are a couple of guys right here in the city, definitely from a good background, and they are 'the organization,' you know, and they need money like they need air to breathe, and if they get a sum from you which you and they agree on, in exchange for which they give you a note which can very easily be hidden, and which you can produce, on arriving at a secure place, to reclaim your money without delay, and if you have doubts, here is a letter from a guy you know, explaining how he did just such a deal and is already in Poland, and the note these guys here gave him, he took to the place they sent him to there, and got his money to the last ruble / zloty / dollar—as agreed—and here right in front of you is the letter I got from him with

confirmation that he did indeed get all of it ... Here, it says: “The snow hasn’t melted yet here”—and didn’t I tell you last month that this sentence, written in the month of *Tammuz*, is precisely the signal that he got his money to the last cent?”

To help trust triumph over skepticism, the underground capitalist asks to meet with the “organization” so they can talk “*tachlis*” [get down to the nitty-gritty].

The foregoing description is not the only example of the wheeling and dealing that went on. There were others. But the hardest part was always that first step, devoted to building the necessary trust in the unofficial financial market.

... We go to the home of someone, a Holocaust survivor. His wife also managed to survive the final push to finish off the remnants. We explain the set-up. They listen attentively. We progress to other subjects. A lively conversation ensues about day-to-day things and then we return to the matter that brought us there. He trusts us. He asks that we return the day after tomorrow. We trust him. Nonetheless, who knows—the day after tomorrow, when we come to his house, might we be met by detectives? On the other hand, he, too, has reason to doubt, and only our mutual “friend” provides a kind of guarantee of fidelity on both sides.

The day comes, and we arrive. From another room, the man brings an impressive quantity of gold coins. It will keep us going for a month, maybe even longer. We count it and agree on the sum that he will receive in Lodz, in dollars. I compose the message and write it on the thin paper from a cigarette: scribbled numbers and letters. I explain to the man that if someone arrives after him with a similar scrap of paper, the second guy won’t get a cent. The code changes ...

The man, a seasoned trader, having learned from bitter experience to be suspicious of every woman’s son, looks at us long and hard.

“Maybe I’m an idiot; maybe I’m crazy ... What if I get to Lodz to this address you gave me, give them the note, demand my money—and they tell me that they have no idea what I’m talking about, and kick my backside out of there?”

And after more thought: “And yet—I believe you.”

We understand that the man has not given us everything he has ... A man like him will not risk everything at once. But that’s also good ...

But suddenly the man adds: “I have a lot more ... and if you can get all of it over there—we can divide it fifty-fifty ...”

Both of us are all ears.

“Where?”

He mentions the place where he hid the major share of his money before he was expelled from his village to the death camp ...

“Thank you. But no. We won’t take the risk.”

This reply reassured him. Now he knew that we weren’t just adventurers.

The departure of my family involved some heart-stopping incidents. My father and mother were brought to Vilna and housed with the Anouliks, whose apartment was across from the police station—let the police protect my parents! But something happened and we thought maybe someone was watching the apartment, so we moved my parents somewhere else. Everything went fine.

To bring my sister and her son, then eight years old, I sent Babka—that is, Shimon Bekin, a relative of Esther Anoulik’s. Babka was a student in Moscow whose “uniqueness” was in being a disabled war veteran, several times decorated, who limped a bit and used a cane. His background in the movement was *Hashomer Hatzair* in Lithuania—*Hakibbutz Ha’artzi*. An educated young man, fluent in Russian and well-versed in Russian literature, especially Russian poetry—it was a pleasure to sit with him and listen as he recited excerpts from the best poets of revolutionary Russia.

Babka came to Riga and went to my sister’s house. Lest the eight-year-old boy give things away with a slip of the tongue, he was not let in on the secret. Watching my sister’s surprise, however, a short time after Babka’s arrival, the child wrapped his arms around her neck and asked in a whisper: “Mama, when are we ever going to Palestine?”

Go keep a secret from a child!

Babka brought them to Vilna and they went to one of our safe houses there.

From this sort of group we could create several families—with old people, their married children and grandchildren. Hannah Cohen, David’s wife, knew Polish, and at the border, when necessary, this activist woman could be offered as spokesperson. One of Alexander’s couriers to us returned to Poland with this “package.” My sister’s son got a temporary “Dad”—and he rather liked it, actually, especially since this dad, David Cohen, pampered him. Raphael Lifshitz’s brother Zalman, who was part of the team of activists, and his wife Zhenya with their newborn baby, and Zalman and Raphael’s mother, comprised an additional family.

The departure point for the shipment of this “package” was the village of Globokoya—in Lesik Shlomovitz’s and Lyubka Mindel’s “territory.”

The parting with my parents was hard. They were aware of the dangers looming over Mulka, me, and our comrades and tried to convince me to go with them, wanting me to get out of Soviet territory already. I promised to come when I was free to leave; they knew I could not go and leave Mulka behind to face all the problems alone. So they did not burden me with pleas, but it didn’t make our farewell any easier. I was anxious to get the agreed-on telegram from Lodz that would release me from wondering and worrying.

Two or three days later, when I was sleeping at one of the safe houses, I awoke

to someone's knocking on the window shutter. It was the middle of the night, which was not particularly calming for someone who had been expecting for several months to be incarcerated. I went to the window and peeked out through a crack.

"It's me, Zeamka. Open up!"

Zalman! The blood froze in my veins. This young man, known as one of the bravest in the Riga headquarters, I knew very well. He was one of my movement young people. The thought that he was here, and not on the train, stunned me: some disaster had taken place! Everyone had been arrested—and only Zeamka had gotten away and come to tell us ...

I hurried to open the door. The first thing out of his mouth was: "Don't worry, everything is okay ..."

No, if everything were all right, he would not have come in the middle of the night.

He proceeded to tell me:

When Lesik brought the "package" to the village, he broke up the group among several lodgings, as usual. My parents went to the hayloft of one of the farmers. After Lyubka Mindel had arranged all the paperwork with the Soviet representative, and when the carriages of the long railroad train were being boarded by the Polish repatriate families with their belongings, their cattle and their household furnishings, our people also went to board the train, but not before they had given Lesik their Soviet documents and received from him the Polish "evaculists." When everyone was already on board, they noticed that the hayloft where my parents had been staying was now on fire. A big fire in a small town was a major incident. Local NKVD agents surrounded the hayloft and environs to expose the "terrorists" who had damaged the nation's assets. Then someone testified that there were Jews in the hayloft. What Jews? Repatriates ... The NKVD people and militia hurried to the train and ordered all the Jews to get out of the carriages ...

With no connection to the fire, if they began interrogating all the Jews as to who they were and what they were doing there, they would undoubtedly have discovered among the repatriates a group that was not from the area, and whom no one among the local people knew, and whose members spoke no Polish and indeed hadn't the slightest right to repatriation. It wasn't hard to imagine that an interrogation on the spot, even a superficial one, would reveal the truth, and possibly also the nature of the role played by the courier returning to the *ma'on* ... Better not to think of the possible consequences.

Lesik understood what was liable to happen unless some bold intervention was improvised immediately. He went to the security agents, asked what had happened and confessed "innocently" that if they were talking about that fire in the hayloft, perhaps he was guilty. "I went in there to relieve myself"—he told

them—“while smoking a cigarette. I guess I threw it out there and maybe that started the fire ...”

The police and security people detained Lesik and all the rest were permitted to reboard the train. At that point Lyubka upbraided the representative of the Poles—the guy with whom we did all our transactions—telling him that if he didn’t make sure the train left immediately, then “you and I, both of us, are going to prison, because I will tell them about all our business with you.”

The train left, heading for the Polish border.

Meantime, the Soviet documents had already been hidden—under a woodpile. If the authorities were to discover these documents one fine day, they would understand the intrigue that was playing out behind their backs—which itself was undesirable; but if they discovered the documents before the “package” crossed the border—they might have sufficient time to advise the security services, and the latter would telegraph to stop our people at the border.

Zeamka left his mother, his wife and their infant and hopped on a fast train to Vilna, and here he was now, standing before me and reporting on the incident.

“We have to send two people immediately: one, to Globokoya, to find the Soviet documents”—and he took a piece of paper and sketched the location of the woodpile, under which the documents were hidden—“and we also have to send someone to the village next to Globokoya, where there are Jews who know Lesik; we must give them money and get him released. Even if he is blamed only for the fire—it could end in a sentence of five to ten years for ‘destroying national assets,’” he noted.

“And I,” Zalman continued, “I must go immediately and board the same train I left, because if I don’t show up for the check at the border, we will have problems again. They’ll refuse to send across all the people who are registered on my documents. They’ll ask where the head of the family is—go try to explain anything to the inspectors at the border ...”

It was still the middle of the night. We woke up Zalman’s brother Raphael and also Bezalel Tauman, and explained the situation and sent them to work on getting Lesik out of jail and finding the documents under the woodpile. Then Zalman and I ran to the train station to check if and when the train from Globokoya would pass through. As anticipated, no one knew and no one wanted to talk to us. I told Zalman to hire a car and drive along the route of the train to the Polish border—either catching up with the train there, or waiting until it arrived. We approached a young man sitting at the wheel of an army Jeep and Zalman explained what was wanted. The driver refused, but when we pulled out two thousand rubles in cash, he changed his mind. Zalman got into the Jeep and its driver started the motor, but Zalman jumped out again, shouting to me, “Here’s my train, coming into the Vilna station! It’s OK!”

We went over to the train. Zalman boarded and took his place with his family;

my sister came out, very upset, and began explaining to me that we have to rescue Lesik, who had saved everyone. I calmed her down. I went to where my parents were sitting, wished them well in Poland, kissed the hand of the elderly lady “as is customary with us in Poland,” and bid my parents farewell again ... for good.

And what of the couriers who had gone to rescue the documents, and Lesik?

There, too, things worked out well. The farmer whose hayloft had burned was not interested in a police investigation and certainly not in an inquiry by the security services. If they looked into it, they would find that he had an illegal still where he turned some of his grain crop into vodka. Hence, when Lesik “confessed” that perhaps he had thrown a burning cigarette into the hayloft, the farmer’s eyes lit up. Lesik claimed that the matter was only about damages, and he would try to reach a compromise with the farmer; if it was about money, they could arrange the local equivalent of a “*sulha*” [mediation]. The two—Lesik and the farmer—agreed between themselves on the amount of compensation, Lesik invited the village notables to the “*sulha*,” and the vodka flowed like water.

Everything turned out fine. The only damage had been monetary. And the fear—paid in frayed nerves.



Yashka Golman continued his military service in East Prussia. His turn for demobilization had not yet come, and we were afraid he would “miss the train.” We knew that the sand in our hourglass was running out.

By dint of some extra effort, we found out that anyone who was a licensed teacher before his conscription was now entitled to immediate demobilization. There was a terrible shortage of teachers.

A teacher—that’s a matter for the Ministry of Education.

At the Ministry of Education in Riga, a friend of ours was working as a secretary, but when it came to lending us, even for an hour, the round rubber stamp of the ministry—with the state seal that makes a document official—she was afraid of the possible outcome. The stamp is kept in the ministry director’s office, and what if he needed it and didn’t find it there? I asked her if she would, at the first convenient moment, just stamp the seal on a blank sheet of white paper.

We printed the documentary evidence on a good sheet of paper, saying that Comrade Yacov Golman had been a teacher before his induction into the military. Using very primitive methods, we copied the stamp onto the “document” and sent it to Yashka. The officer who received it from him suspected that something was amiss and invited the “former teacher” to appear with his document at the district military headquarters in Riga, to be discharged; why should he, the officer in Königsberg, take responsibility for this himself?

En route from East Prussia, Yashka passed through Vilna. I took another look

at my handiwork and admitted that it could indeed put its bearer at risk. Yashka did not continue to the district office. He deserted and was sent across to Poland.

We had official stamps of all kinds hidden away, for every occasion: travel permits, work permits, bathhouse certificates, medical checkups, excused absences from work, and so forth. We also hoarded the documents of the people who left the country—at least until their owners had reached the *ma'on*. In case of need, we could give a man or a woman a new identity and even award them Soviet army medals.

On the disaster in Lvov, we had an eyewitness report from Yankel Hefetz, who was there when the arrests were made. Aside from Yankel, in Lvov, there were also Isaac Katz and Leibl Lempert—both army deserters whom Mulka was most anxious to send across the border to greater safety. By some miracle, the three had not been arrested.

Yankel set out, equipped with a document testifying that he had been sent to Lvov to purchase musical instruments, and the two deserters were equipped with, of all things, military travel orders—fictitious, of course.

Since it was preferable for the two deserters not to be conspicuous, command had been passed to Yankel.

Yankel Hefetz:

... They did not give me Kopel's address. He did not yet have one. I had to approach the Jewish community, to go to the place serving as the community center where the head of the community would also be. I was told that I should put a bandage on my head—as if I had a toothache—and walk around there until someone made contact with me who would put me in touch with Kopel. We arrived in Lvov. Leibl stayed at the train station, because he did not want to be found dressed in uniform near the community's gathering place.

I was told that, if no one met me, I should report to the head of the community and talk openly with him, and that he would understand. I was at the community center for hours and hours and no one came up to me. Finally today I went to the office of the head of the community and told him that I want to talk with him privately. He asked his secretary to leave us. I told him that I was sent from Vilna. He opened a drawer in his desk and removed a list, perused it, and began reading names aloud—they included almost all our people from Tashkent. He said I would sleep in the community center that night and the next day he would arrange for me to meet Kopel.

Our meetings with Kopel took place in the synagogue. Avraham Esset brought us to a house where another few of our people were liv-

ing. Leibl and Isaac were lodged somewhere else. I sat and waited for Avraham, who was supposed to bring us transit permits to Poland. Avraham was able to get only one permit in the name of Aharon Kreiter, age eighteen. Around that time, emissaries from Poland arrived, Zhenya Kless and Yerachmiel Yanovsky, and I was in the room where Zhenya was staying. Meantime Kopel and a few others had been arrested. A few days later, one of them was released—the Strashina. We met with him and he told me that he had been released because he bribed the man in charge of the interrogation—with a gold ring. I trusted him—after all, he was an emissary! It never occurred to me to wonder how he had been released ... One evening, when we were sitting in a room with Avraham, Zhenya, and another young woman activist, two NKVD men showed up—one was an Armenian—and they began asking us questions about what we were doing, as if it were an ordinary inspection. Afterwards the Armenian began checking our belongings. It was not a very thorough check. He did not even look in the cupboard—which is actually where my transit permit to Poland was, in the name of Kreiter. He went straight to Zhenya's suitcase. The suitcase had false sides, and he quickly found documents, money, a tube of toothpaste with dollars hidden inside, and other things. He never touched me or the other young woman. He obviously knew who each of us was. He said to Avraham Esset, for instance, while pointing at me: "Why don't you send Hefetz to Palestine?" He opened my suitcase but did not pay much attention to it. Then he began taunting Zhenya.

Zhenya denied everything, every which way: The suitcase isn't hers and she doesn't know whose it is, nor the identity of whoever owns the dollars and the other money ... The detectives even knew that she had dyed her hair as a disguise and they made fun of her, insulted her and threatened her ... Her behavior was very proud, really exemplary. In the end, they took Zhenya and Avraham, but they did not touch me or the young woman who was sitting in the room with us, Sarah. When I went outside, I saw that they were also putting Yerachmiel into the prisoners' vehicle. The next day I met Isaac. One look at my face and he knew at once that something disastrous had happened. We agreed that one of us would go to Poland and the other two would go to Vilna and report on what had occurred ... And since in the evaculist we had, Kreiter's age was given as eighteen, I used it; Isaac and Leibl can't pass for eighteen.

Yankel went to the border; Isaac and Leibl, to Vilna.

Yankel managed—not without setbacks—to reach the *ma'on*, where he reported to Alexander and other senior people in the *bricha* organization on the Lvov incident.

Back in Vilna, Isaac Katz and Leibl Lempert reported everything they knew.

Though it was difficult and very costly, we were able to obtain transit permits for the two of them. Both reached the *ma'on* safely.

From their joint report, we concluded that one of the suitcases that the emissaries had brought to Lvov—evidently the one carried by Yerachmiel—was intended for us.

As noted, we learned from this: We changed the safe houses, we changed the nicknames for writing to each other, we kept our eyes open and were more alert.

■ ■ ■

The betrayal by the emissary shocked us.

In a very restricted circle, a discussion ensued about the question of what Mulka should do if he were exposed in Lvov, since the Strashina was an informer. It was clear that every last detail of the Lvov affair should be investigated; everything possible should be done to help the prisoners; we should warn the *ma'on* and make a full report to Alexander; but how should we handle the informer? What should happen to an emissary who transgresses?

Raising the question almost dictates the answer: In the manual—the “*Shulchan Aruch*”—of any self-respecting underground organization, the penalty for treason is death.

A death sentence! Was this to be our job? And who would carry it out?

From a technical standpoint, there should be no obstacle. The man walked around the streets of Lvov as though he had no mark of Cain imprinted on his forehead, and sought contact with *bricha* people. Conceivably, the more he “sang” for his interrogators, the more they would demand, threaten, pressure, and argue: “That’s not good enough, you piece of filth, to punish you for your sins against the motherland. Not yet ... Go find out who their superiors are. All of them.”

He could be isolated, and overcome ...

But maybe our proof was too insubstantial? We ought to hear what he had to say. A trial? One of those murky underground trials, in the woods, in the middle of the night? “You, the accused! What is your version?” or “Do you admit or deny this?” and finally: “Any regrets? Do you have anything else to say?”

My memory is very foggy when I think back on this affair. I don’t even remember who, aside from Mulka, took part in this brief, superficial discussion. I remember only a sickening feeling very different from the ordinary experience of the extraordinary lives we were leading.

Conscious repression?

Finally, we sobered up. Everything the Strashina knew, the interrogators had already extracted from him. We thought: “The Lvov people not yet arrested already suspect him and will not give him any more chances to learn useful information; the serious damage already done cannot be repaired, whether we punish him or not; but if we punish him, we will prove to the authorities that the organization dealing with the transport of Jews is more dangerous to the Soviet state than previously thought; more manpower would be allocated to uncovering this terrorist organization, border inspections would be more severe, the hunt would gain momentum ... No, this is not our object. We must stick with getting people to Palestine. Any other activity that might damage this primary effort is not germane.”

Thus we ought to isolate the traitor, and help the prisoners, continue doing what we do.

Must we obey a “*Shulchan Aruch*” that is not our own?

Meantime, Mulka prepared to go to Lvov.

Why? Was it not proven that the suspect was a traitor? Or was Mulka, sensing the danger, drawn to it?

To get to Lvov, Mulka needed a travel order—a *komandirovka*, in the official state jargon—from an established organization that would, if required, attest to the police or the security services that it had indeed sent Pinchas Dembovsky—known to all as Pavlik—to Lvov. And Mulka would also need someone to go with him, to report to the Vilna center on his moves in the field and, in case of disaster, to try and save him.

Nissim Anoulik, remember, was the chief accountant for the Latvian Railway Authority. The Railway Authority in the Soviet Union was in some sense part of the state security forces and its employees were treated like army conscripts. A *komandirovka* from such an organization is better than one from the Ministry of Culture or the Ministry of Chemical Industry or even the Ministry of Coal Mining.

The performance was carried out using a script crafted by a team headed by Nissim Anoulik.

The demobilized soldier Pinchas Yossiovich Dembovsky is looking for work. He has a trade, a trade in much demand, actually. He is an accountant. Dembovsky approaches the Latvian Railway Authority for a job in accordance with his skills. The human resources department—the “cadres” department—had already heard complaints from the chief financial officer, Comrade Anoulik, that he needs a Russian-speaking professional. In Lithuania, expert accountants who were also completely fluent in Russian were not wandering around loose for the taking.

The human resources department received Dembovsky's particulars and he was asked to complete a long, detailed questionnaire, in which he noted regretfully that the documents attesting to his professional training and the references from offices in which he worked were lost in the confusion of warfare—very common at the time. Someone from the personnel department got in touch with Anoulik and asked him to interview the new applicant—maybe he'd find him suitable.

Comrade Anoulik's meeting with Comrade Dembovsky was exceedingly formal, but the applicant somehow found favor with his future boss. After half an hour or so of discussion between the two of them, the chief accountant asked to talk to his director, as protocol dictated.

An accountant is a not unimportant component of any office, and how much more so at the Railway Authority. The director stepped into the accountant's office.

"Kindly permit me to introduce Comrade Dembovsky, a demobilized combat soldier, who wishes to join our office. The personnel department checked his personal documents, and his professional skills I checked myself. As you know, in Klaipeda we were suddenly left without a suitable employee, and I am sure that Comrade Dembovsky can take charge of the financials there. I would not want us to be reprimanded at the end of the fiscal year due to a delay at Klaipeda ..."

Dembovsky did not hide his disappointment. He had hoped to be hired to work here, in the center—everyone wants to be as close to the center as possible ... But the chief accountant hastened to explain to Dembovsky that it was now "critical" to address the delay in Klaipeda; the moment a position was open in Vilna, and if the new employee's work proved satisfactory, he would be transferred to Vilna and they would even arrange housing for him. When is Comrade Dembovsky prepared to begin work?

Dembovsky became a little emotional and began to explain that he is ready to start tomorrow, even, but first he must fetch his wife and their daughter from the town of Stryj. They suffered much when left on their own, and he could not leave them there now, after all they have endured during the war. He will travel to Stryj, pick up his family, and travel with them straight to Klaipeda.

"When can you leave for Stryj? If I am not mistaken, that is about 60 or 70 kilometers from Lvov, is it not?"

"Quite so. I will write to my wife that I am about to come there, and she will go to the village committee and ask them to give me a permit to go and get them ..."

Anoulik furrowed his brow: "No, no ... This bureaucracy is killing us. We cannot work that way. At least two weeks will pass before the Stryj workers committee does anything, and the mails ... No, that will kill our report."

Dembovsky sat, head hanging, apologetic.

"Dmitri Alexyovitch, the responsibility for submitting the annual report is

great. I needn't tell you that. These bureaucrats are ruining everything good ... Maybe we can speed things up here, ourselves? From the moment Dembovsky is hired here and working for us, we are authorized to send him on official business to Stryj. I will compose something about a check on the accounting there. He will receive a *komandirovka* from us to check the accounts and will go there, fetch his wife and daughter, return post-haste with them here—and on to Klaipeda. What do you think?"

The boss was not opposed. The Authority could send its employees wherever they were needed. And he added: "Give Nikitin a call, ask him to prepare a ticket for the sleeping car ... You know what's happening on the roads now; tell Nikitin the request comes from me ..."

A *komandirovka* from the Railway Authority, power of attorney to check the accounts, a sleeping car ticket ... all serious documents; if their traveler was stopped en route and showed these documents there would be additional questions, but Nissim was already taking care of it: "The bearer is our employee and is travelling at our direction ..."

It was not an insurance policy, but Mulka could hope for no more.



The people detained in the transport disaster in Vilna were finally given a trial, conducted in the prison without an audience, but details of what transpired leaked out even to us. The defense attorney was the famous Brauda. The name of the Muscovite attorney made headlines worldwide when he took part in the Moscow show trials in 1936-38. Not that the defense attorney could have acquitted those accused back then, or saved their lives, but the fact of his being their attorney and surviving himself afterwards was considered a rare achievement.

In Vilna people said that the acclaimed Brauda had been brought from Moscow by a Polish Jew named Katz and that it had cost him a bundle. Katz was about to leave for Poland.

Brauda indeed showcased the power of the Soviet legal defense system: For many of the accused in Vilna, the charge was converted from a charge of "treason" to the milder one of "unlawful crossing of the border." That was the Muscovite's great victory: He proved to the judges that the Poland "of the people" is not really an enemy nation; indeed, it is a friendly nation—hence anyone trying to sneak into Poland is not really heretical. Some of the heads of the network were in fact found guilty as "traitors to the motherland" but at the second or third degree of seriousness and squeaked by with a prison sentence of 2, 3, or 5 years, which in the Soviet Union is considered a "kindergarten" punishment, and what's more they escaped conviction for any political crime.

Brauda's name on the Jewish street in Vilna glowed even more brightly.

We learned that some of the young men among the accused had even been sentenced to probation, and released. Among the lucky ones was Moshe Antokol, with whom one of our comrades was acquainted. We suggested to our comrade that he go to Dvinsk, congratulate the young man on his release and bring him back.

When the two reached Vilna, I felt the need to have a talk with Moshe Antokol. In my heart, I wondered about the reasons for his release, and I also wanted to know whom he had seen in jail, what he had been questioned about, and so forth. And I wondered about something else: Might we have need of his experience?

Because I did not want to make myself known to this Moshe, who might have been “turned” by his interrogators—and therefore released—I asked that he come to our headquarters during the night. One of the places we used in Vilna belonged to Yehudith—a survivor of the Kovno ghetto; her apartment was a basement flat on a street parallel to the river. I sat in the dark, my face in shadow, with the slow current of the river reflected in the moonlight on the window. The young man sat down opposite me, a little way off.

Moshe had been through a tough interrogation in prison—he’d been beaten and tortured. There had been a moment when he thought that the filthy, stinking Lukiskes Prison was going to be his last station on this earth. During the war, on the Soviet home front, he had known hunger and freezing cold, and had survived only thanks to his “golden hands,” his skill at metalworking. After the war, he returned to his home city and was adopted by some religious Jews there; he was trying to get out with them to Poland, on that ill-fated night, and was caught. Often he found it hard to believe that he would really get out of there alive.

Now he was sitting once again and being questioned in the middle of the night. No, no one was beating him; but the interrogator, with pointed questions, was trying to catch him in a lie ... What could they do to him? Throw him into the river to die, who knew where? Why would they? There was only one choice: to tell the truth, only the truth, not to lie, not to invent ...

Possibly I went a little too far in the role of interrogator; possibly my nightmares about midnight interrogations were too vivid in my memory. Many years later he related that there, in that dark apartment, he was overcome with the sense that his end was palpably drawing nearer. Had I already been through what yet awaited me in my future, I might have been more careful ...

I advised our people to send him out to Poland. What was the point of sending him back to Dvinsk?

But somehow he repeatedly got into trouble: At one crossing point, they were unsuccessful; from another point, they were forced to turn back; at a third, it didn’t work out; and they made a fourth try, in vain. Finally when Moshe was really at his wits’ end, heaven was suddenly merciful and this young man who had

emerged from Lukiskes by a miracle finally crossed the border to Poland safely, with another bumpy road ahead of him to reach *Eretz Yisrael*.

I went into the city for a meeting with Mr. Katz. I asked him for a letter of reference to Attorney Brauda, in case I needed him to defend our people who had been arrested in Lvov.

The man said he would do as I asked. He would give me the letter just before leaving for Poland—if I would kindly come to his house, he would gladly give me the letter of reference. Why not?

A short while later I learned that Katz was already in Poland.

Lesik told me that, during his work in the vicinity of Globokoya village, he got help from Lyubka Mindel, a local lad. Lesik trusted him fully, but I wanted to know more about the man, who had not come from our own ranks and had not been recommended to us by anyone.

Lesik related that Lyubka, a Holocaust refugee, fought during the war years in a partisan unit and now was supposedly working in some factory, or some bureau, but actually traded under the table—travelling somewhere, bringing goods back that cannot be obtained here, and going from here to somewhere else, and returning again ... The young man was daring, and behaved in such a way that no one wanted to tangle with him; he was devoted to Lesik, but was starting to ask questions ... So during the first transport, Lesik told him that these were relatives who wanted to go to Poland and that he, Lesik, had to help them; the second time around, Lesik said they were just acquaintances and Lyubka swiftly replied that “yes, acquaintances, but why not make a profit off them?” The third time Lesik told him the people were “friends of friends,” but the excuses had run out. Duba, Lesik’s sister, who was serving as courier between Vilna and Globokoya on the train, also ran into Lyubka, and he began bothering her, too, with questions:

“What’s your part in your brother’s business?”

“We make a profit, we trade, so what?”

“Ah, so you’re a trader? In what?”

“In gold ...”

“Really—in gold? You don’t strike me as a gold trader ... What is a gold coin going for in Vilna now?”

The young woman muttered something—and the canny young man of experience just smiled a little smile ...

Lyubka had a wife and a new baby.

When he came to Vilna, Lesik talked a lot about his new friend, about what it was like in his house, about his wit, his jokes ... There was no doubt about it, the two had become devoted friends; Lesik even recommended that we ask him

to join us, to become an activist. The idea did not sit well with me. This young man had been knocking around in sewers since childhood, without a family—his father was killed by a mob right in front of him; he was about fourteen when he joined the partisans; betrayal and informing and a cruel struggle to survive are not the right setting for an education in the values our team lives by.

Lesik would not be put off. He wanted me to meet his friend. Inwardly I was thinking that this Lyubka has already grasped that ours is not really a commercial enterprise, and Lesik may not even realize how much he had infected him with the enthusiasm of our people, while working with him, even without imparting precise information. A vague story would have been enough to pique the imagination of this clever young man ...

When Lesik brought him to our apartment on the riverbank, I saw a slim, provocative young man with clever eyes and an insolent smile on his lips. With a word or two of encouragement, the guest related his misdeeds, history with the police, the trading he was doing—a bit about his past and about his new friend Lesik with whom he had become so connected.

“Lesik tells me that he deals in profiteering, that he’s making money on the evacuation to Poland ... Come on! I look at his boots and see the holes ... Lesik made no less than I did on his deals, right? I mean many thousands—and he can’t save enough to buy himself some decent boots? Some big speculator!”

I asked him what he knew about Zionism.

In his village, Dolhinov, there were two Zionist organizations, *Hashomer Hatzair* and *Betar*. At one they played cards, and at the other the guys would feel up the girls and the girls would squeal. “Don’t ask me about Ben-Gurion, Jabotinsky, Weizmann. I know nothing about all that. But listen, when we came with the partisans into Vilna and I sat down at a restaurant, and someone from the *banditim* said something about the Jews—okay, maybe I imagined it—I floored him with one punch.”

Four years in the forest with people in despair, or beyond despair, were a kind of schooling ... Now, where to? Can he stop, or will he end his life somewhere in a forced labor camp with a lot of “criminals”? Sink lower, for hire?

I was impressed with the young man’s frankness, although it was thoroughly pretentious. I sensed that it was clear to him that money was not our primary object, and I, breaching all our protocol, told him that we get people out to Poland, Jews who are willing to go and fight our enemies in *Eretz Yisrael* and who want to work to build the country there—Zionism on one foot, as Hillel might have said ...

If he was surprised, it wasn’t by what I said but the fact that I spoke so openly.

“Will you join us?”

The response came the next day. He came into the house, paced up and down

nervously, and asked me to go into another room with him. He then took a sheaf of bills from his pocket, put them on the windowsill—the room had no table—and explained, seeming either genuinely moved or else joking: “Since your work is not mercenary, I’ve brought the 30,000 rubles I’ve made off you. I thought it was for the money; that you ...”

When I sent him on missions for us, I would ask him: Did you leave money for your wife’s expenses? Maybe she’s short?

“What’s the use of giving money to a woman? However much you give her, she’ll fritter it away.”

“She doesn’t seem that sort to me. And after all, she has to live, you have a baby ...”

“What does the baby need? She’s nursing; it’s all supplied ...”

Evidently Lyubka did not share his underground secrets with his wife Rachel. Maybe he muttered something inconclusive here and there, but the woman—with plenty of life experience of her own—soon noticed that her husband was behaving differently these days. He had begun speaking less coarsely after coming to Vilna, and she understood that this was part of a quid pro quo, perhaps a dangerous one. One day she came to me, the infant in her arms.

“What happened? Lyubka forgot to leave you money?”

No. She was managing fine. What was bothering her was the change in her husband: He was talking differently, more courteously! Weren’t we involved in ... spying, and wasn’t it dangerous? Really ...

I calmed her: Spying—no.

Lyubka waded into the work with his whole heart, with energy and understanding.

■ ■ ■

During this difficult period, with almost nobody being transported to Poland, we began looking for alternate routes as soon as we felt a little better. We were always haunted by the worry that the regular route, which had become routine via our connection with the Poles, might become impassable. Rumors that the trains carrying the repatriates “would cease” gave us no respite. And indeed, as of May 1946 the full trainloads of Polish farmers and their belongings leaving the Soviet Union to return to Poland were discontinued, although the journeys known as “*valizkovem*” (“suitcase in hand”) continued; anyone in possession of an exit permit was permitted by the Soviet Authorities to purchase a ticket for an ordinary passenger train leaving for Poland and to cross the border if he could show documents proving that he was a repatriate. This was certainly a relief to us, but there were still rumors that this option, too, would soon be blocked. Either way, we did not want to be wholly dependent on a single lifeline.

Leibl Lempert was sent by Mulka to East Prussia, where he had once served in the army, to check the possibilities there. He returned empty-handed.

At a later stage, Mulka went with Nehemia Gross to Rovno, to see whether it might be possible to infiltrate our passengers there among the repatriates returning to Czechoslovakia—there was a short period during which citizens of that country who, during the war, had ended up in the Soviet Union, were eligible to return to their homeland. On arriving in Rovno, the two emissaries found that the risk was too great. There were very few Czech repatriates, and the chances were nil that extra travelers could be successfully camouflaged among their ranks: Not only did our people not speak the language spoken by these Czech farmers, outwardly they could hardly pass as farmers.

There was another way, known as the “green” route. This involved getting as close as possible to the Polish border and trying to cross it on foot. There was such a route in the vicinity of Alitus, evidently, on the Soviet-Polish border. From local people there we heard that periodically a horse fair was held there, and farmers would come freely from both sides of the border to buy and sell, returning to their homes afterwards without being checked. The defect in this route, as in all “green” routes, was the greater danger if one was caught; it was an area swarming with Lithuanian and Polish partisan fighters, who were fiercely hunted by the Soviet militias. Among these nationalist fighters were a variety of murderers of Jews, a great many, who in their time had been active in the ghettos and the extermination camps: they not only hated Jews but also lived in fear of their revenge, and particularly feared Jews who had joined the Soviet security services for that purpose. Hence there was real danger to the lives of those attempting to cross the border on foot, should they encounter these bands. From all that we had learned, the hard way, in the Soviet Union, we had no reason whatever to sympathize with such characters. These enemies of our enemies were not our friends, absolutely not; the problem of Jewish loyalty to a regime in exile did not arise at all in this context, nor had it been put to the test.

At that time we were in contact with a Lithuanian “Righteous Gentile” (a non-Jew who helped Jews survive the Holocaust)—and in Lithuania, there weren’t many; he and his wife had risked their lives to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. Now, they offered encouragement to our aspiration to make our way to our homeland. Both had good connections with the Lithuanian nationalist underground, which sought to liberate Lithuania from the foreign yoke of the Russians and maintained ties with their Polish counterparts (during this period, both sides attempted to set aside the mutual Polish-Lithuanian hatred that was an outcome of bad neighborly relations in the past). We were promised—that is, Mulka and I—that if our situation worsened to the point where all hope was lost, this Lithuanian Righteous Gentile would do all he could to see that his friends in the Lithuanian underground would help move us to a place of safety.

There were righteous people even in Sodom.

All the same, as long as the way to Poland was open to repatriates, we were in no hurry to resort to extreme alternatives.

An almost idyllic letter was sent from Vilna to Lodz during the height of the departures, aspiring to guide Nikolai-Alexander, or “our man in Lodz” Yekutiel Shor, concerning how he could enlist the immigrants we were sending him in the national endeavor ...

At the top of this letter appeared the number 2704, written in full confidence that the clever decryption staff at the Soviet security services would never discover the meaning of that date to be the 27th of April. Maximum security, indeed!

TN. AM. [Meaning, in code: “To Nikolai” (known as “Alexander” until the arrests in Lvov); “At the Ma’on” (our center in Lodz)].

In package 8, which is very large, I am sending you all kinds:

(1) *the head of the class with ... David’s people know of him from his work in leading Aleph until the war. Now in Rivka he almost has not participated in the work. [Meaning: In the transport of the eighth group, there is a mob of people. The person in charge has a financial transfer, i.e., we received from him, or via him, money (please look at the note, decipher it and repay the aforementioned what he is owed). The comrades from Kovno, from “Hashomer Hatzair Pioneer Scouting Youth” (make no mistake, this is not Hakibbutz Ha’artzi) know him from before the war and you can trust us, he is okay although he has not been active since the war ended.]*

(2) *From the family of the young man in Section B—are four people from Rivka. Please see to them. The young man should be put to work. He is able and has good sense, likewise the young women, loyal comrades. [Meaning: Please pick up our letter, sent to you with the second group, and you will find that the family of a young man who was there is now arriving; his brother is talented and should be utilized in educational work or on the bricha routes; don’t waste him, even though he is young; and his sisters, fantastic!, they’ll do anything you ask of them.]*

(3) *Three from David Mem-Daled—This “gift” was sent to us for transfer, I know nothing of them whatever aside from the problems I have with this type. [Meaning: Perhaps this was a superficial evaluation, although we can assume that there was something behind it and the people annoyed me, maybe they made pests of themselves with “But can you guarantee that everything will be okay?” as if I had an agreement with the Soviet border patrol ... and you, go ahead and*

swear to them in writing that they will reach “the aunt” safely ...]

(4) The mother and two children. The two children, a boy and a girl, are already with you. Two sisters from hell, absolutely without experience, chatterboxes, but take them in hand and they will become human. We didn’t have enough time to “educate” them. In future, better material will be coming from there ... [Meaning: The mother, with two children, will find her two children who already were sent beforehand. Great! Rejoicing all around! Meantime, as to those two awful girls from Shavli—who are they, in heaven’s name? I actually had a good connection with the girls from Shavli, so why did I skewer them? What is the meaning of this embarrassing denunciation?]

(5) The girl called Sheindele—put her in touch with her sister, a young woman with potential.

(6) A young Saul. Recently he was in Don. Make sure you educate him a little. His cousin will soon be exempted from conscription and will start working.

(7) A young woman from Rivka—the sister of one of our activists in the city. A very industrious young woman, with a lot of energy; her family will be coming from somewhere else (an excellent family, all of whose adults are working). With her is a local young man from the village, whom she thinks should be integrated with our young people. [Meaning: And furthermore, why ever did I not continue as director of some section or other of the network? Why should I let this Sheindele keep her abilities under wraps for later discovery? Since when am I God? (Sheindele, speak up, tell your story, please! Was I right or wrong about you? ...) And in Lodz, they have nothing else to do than to start the re-education of this young Shavli fellow until his cousin arrives and takes on that task? And the undisguised nepotism regarding the “energetic” young woman from my city? How did I get into all this, and who made me the psychotherapist for the bricha?]

(8) A young woman from Rivka who was in the mvt [movement] for a long time and is thoroughly trained.

(9) A woman—a Hebrew and kindergarten teacher—one of Tuvia’s people carrying kosher papers. We helped her with money so that she could accompany the package as someone who speaks the language. I think you should also use her as a teacher; she plans to work in her profession. We received good recommendations for her. [Meaning: A teacher, a kindergarten teacher, who teaches Hebrew—what a pedigree! (And in the profession, folks, or have the charming sabras already embittered your life and put you to work in bookkeeping long since?)]—And she had authentic documents and speaks Polish,

and she's from Tuvia, i.e., from Poland. They gave her a little money (evidently she spent all she had to get "clean" identity documents) so that she could act as spokesperson at the border. And as to the young woman from Rivka, my own city, you can rely on her—top rank!]

I sent a detailed letter reporting on events here with C[omrade] Daled. Still here, no changes. We've been left without a cent and there are no prospects. We are waiting for help and news. I've heard nothing from my family. I assume that they arrived safely. Definitely send them my greetings. Regards from Chava. Ciao! Nina. [Meaning: As of today I don't know where my family is; this is heart-wrenching, but it's not good form to worry about your parents. Nepotism? Come on! Other people don't have parents?]

Let us know that this package has arrived safely. It's very large and I fear for its safety. Details about the shipment—are with the sister of the "activist." Advise Eliezer Ribach in Benjamin that his wife has now been sent in P[ackage] Onaanaa 5 in M-n. [Meaning: "Onaanaa 5"? What is that? I simply don't remember. And what does M-n mean—perhaps "Munchen" (Munich)?]

May passed, with successes and with tension. During May, we transported 81 people to Poland—a new high! But our financial situation was grim: We had a feeling, although hard to prove, that if we had had more money, we could have sent many more "packages" to the border. Money! Requests, arguments, entreaties, demands, threats about a looming disaster, appeals to conscience designed to extract donations to our treasury so as to fund our activities—run through nearly all the letters like a red thread. We were always "in the red," the situation was always "catastrophic." We always threatened that the work would have to be halted, we begged and pleaded ...

From Mulka's letter to Alexander of May 11th:

... We are in debt 250 books [a quarter of a million rubles]. This has to be repaid in about ten days. And if we do not—you understand what could happen. Aside from which, the entire program is in danger of having to stop. The young people we need, we have already, and also I hope we can create possibilities for shipping, but without setting aside at least 250 books for continuing the program, there's no point. So in the next few days if we do not receive around 1000 books, the result will be a catastrophe, and even I, Nina, and the other activists won't be able to leave. Every day now more former movement people show up, from the army, from the east, and it would be a sin for us to abandon them ...

The inadequacies of Mulka's Hebrew style reflected more than his limited ability to express himself in writing, in any language. When composing such a letter, the writer was obliged to focus simultaneously on the resolution of various different problems as they arose, while meantime the person in charge of the departing group would have been glancing periodically at his watch, tapping his foot and blurting, "Nu? Is the letter ready yet? Can we get going already?"

In May we were worrying about another problem: What was happening to the people we were sending? Why were we not receiving confirmation of their safe arrival? And how were the people on the Polish side dealing with "our people"? Were they utilizing them properly?

Mulka, later in that same letter:

During the past month we sent about 60 packages and still have no confirmation on any of them. The security situation allows for doubt about whether boys are being born at the border, and overall whether it may not be impossible to continue shipping until there's confirmation on all the packages we've sent. Not getting confirmations can ruin everything because all the possibilities are ending here during these last weeks and we will miss the boat. So consider that now every possible and even impossible effort has to be made to send us books, otherwise it's all finished here!

And indeed, the rumor intensified that, at the end of May, repatriation to Poland would cease.

Two days later, Mulka reminded Alexander that five months had already passed since he took on his position in the Soviet Union, and that it had originally been agreed that he would be there for only three; he is not complaining about not being replaced (in fact I personally suspected that he was actually quite happy about it), but he needed to use that fact in order to put forward the argument that "you are abandoning us" and to demand that they be sent books, "not pennies."

... I don't know who will take responsibility if it turns out that we had to avoid sending another 30 packages due to lack of money—but certainly we are not going to be responsible for it!

The exclamation point suggests a certain fury, but I would not swear to the notion that, due to a shortage of means, we had rejected the pleas of thirty actual immigrants ... So long as they were still honoring the transfers at Lodz—i.e., our "checks"—we were of course sinking into debt, but still hanging on.

Mulka made a decision that did not surprise me: He left for Lodz for a meeting

with Alexander, to organize the finances “once and for all,” to confirm that all of “our packages” had arrived safely and to look into how the “human material” we were sending was being utilized ...

No, there had been no need for Mulka to undertake this trip, unless he was not to return. Hence, at an ad hoc meeting of the activists, those present tried to persuade him not to return to the Soviet Union and suggested me as his replacement ... Mulka mumbled something to the effect of “Possibly, we’ll see, we’ll see how things go.” I knew that he would come back, I knew he would not abandon his “baby,” and that he would not travel further without me, so I did not try at all to dissuade him. Mulka felt trapped in a routine existence now (Heavens!—routine?); crossing the border in both directions would put an end to that ...

Mulka joined one of the departing groups, crossed the border with it, and reported in at the *ma'on*. The days were filled with meetings with Alexander, with activists, with emissaries from Palestine, with our friends. Some people tried to draw him into party quarrels and enlist him in this or that faction ... but although he went through the motions of taking it seriously, given that the subject was so sacred, he really saw it as inconsequential: What are they fighting about, after what happened to our people here!

And we, in Vilna, continued to send people in shipments, stayed in touch with the other sites, did what we could about funding, took care of people’s personal problems, continued trying to contact the Lvov prisoners, worried about “the birth of a son” at the border, and so forth.

When would he return?

There was a sense that all the dates had passed. From Lodz, we received confirmation that he had arrived there safely, and a telegram sent from there a while later informed us that he had departed for Vilna ... But where had he gotten stuck, where was he headed, how could we check where he was being delayed?

We could not imagine that Mulka, of all people, would wind up caught in a trap.

I tried to allay the fears and concerns of the comrades. I tried to appear as though I knew something that I wasn’t permitted to share with them—anything so that there would be no panic while *aliya* was continuing. But during those brief months of summer, I found it difficult to fall asleep, and the more time that passed, the more I began to wonder if indeed something had happened to him; and I asked myself what we should do if that turned out to be true.

In our basement apartment, I slept alongside a shuttered window that looked out toward the river. The sidewalk was at window level, and from inside the room I could see the sort of shoes that passersby were wearing ...

A knocking on the shutter woke me. My heart sank. I cleared my throat.

And then my code name, spoken by Mulka himself, upon my soul!

"Nina?"

"Yes!"

I wasted no time on the locked door. I shoved the shutter open, raised the window—and something black and solid landed inside on the floor. Before I could manage to say a word, it gurgled: "*Brach hagomel!*" [roughly: Praised be He who delivers us from evil!] And then between a plea and an order, "A bath ... and some sleep!"

I helped him into the washroom. Between the two of us, we got him out of the rags he was wearing and into the bathtub, while I heard the gist of his story of "the flight from jail" and he asked for a drink—vodka or cognac or wine. He lay in the tub looking barely conscious, eyes closed. I worried he might fall asleep. I woke up Ella, our landlady, explaining briefly that Mulka had returned, that he was in the bathtub and that she should make him something to eat.

The bath and the alcohol revived him. I scrubbed his body, his hands and feet, his face. He began telling his story but periodically his eyes would close and his hands lie almost helpless in the water, his strength all but drained by exhaustion, excitement, and happiness.

"Do you see me? It's me. I ran away. From the selection camp, I ran ... It was in Brest. You see all the coal stuck to me? I fled in a coal car. In with the coal. Under the coal ... Something to drink, cold water. No. Tea. Who made the tea—Ella?"

As he alternately dozed off and woke up again, I kept scrubbing him. I had already changed the bathwater a few times—Ella kept heating water. I thrust some food into his mouth. Finally I hauled him out of the bath, and he collapsed on the bed and slept.

A merciful deliverance indeed! What a mess!

At the *ma'on*, they had prepared travel papers for Mulka, dressed him in the uniform of a demobilized soldier and sent him on his way. His papers stated that he had been drafted in Lvov by the Soviet army after the city was liberated, that he had served in such-and-such a unit and was now discharged from the army and was returning from Poland to his home city in the Soviet Union. Many discharged soldiers left their units in this manner, heading for home, where they would receive their civilian ID papers. But our people in Lodz did not know that the Soviet authorities had at that time instituted a "slight" adjustment in procedures: Anyone who had been drafted by the Soviet army from within the territory that had been under German control during the war, was now required to undergo a security check. For this purpose, at the crossing points all along the Soviet Union's western border, checkpoints had been set up where all those entering were scrutinized very carefully. Anyone who had lived under the Nazi regime was now a suspected Nazi collaborator and, who knows, might now be sent back to the Soviet Union by the Western security services ... The burden of proof was

on the person being checked. Since Mulka had been “drafted in Lvov,” which had been under Nazi occupation, he was required to prove to the Soviet interrogators that he was not an agent of the Nazis, or others.

Unaware of the new Soviet procedure, Mulka got into trouble—whereas, had his document stated that he was inducted in Soviet territory not occupied by the Nazis, all would have been well. Under interrogation, Mulka argued that he was liberated from the Lvov ghetto and also conscripted there. The interrogators asked him to supply details and Mulka provided many more, yet the interrogators remained skeptical: The man standing before them, impressive looking, educated, wearing eyeglasses, did not look to them like an ordinary soldier ... and if he had gotten out of the ghetto alive—what had he traded for his release? It seemed best to check with his unit to see what they knew of him.

The detention facilities in the Brest transit camp on the Soviet border with Poland were not the worst. One could evade the armed sentry stationed at the gate. But how to rescue the suitcase with thousands of dollars hidden inside—a considerable sum, which Mulka did not want to abandon? The investigators had not yet discovered the money, but they were suspicious ...

After some eight days in detention, Mulka was called for further interrogation. Now, they threatened him: If he did not tell them the whole truth—he would be stripped and beaten until he told “everything you have done and not done,” as they put it.

At this point Mulka realized, “to hell with the money.” He had to get out of there.

In the evening, the detainees were taken from their shed to a bathhouse, a dilapidated shed with water faucets and a stove for disinfecting. A single guard, rifle in hand, walked up and down on the veranda and kept an eye on the prisoners to make sure they did not run away, but in truth, where could they run to? In Brest, a large city, armed soldiers on patrol watched everything and checked people’s papers. You would not get far even if you ran, my friend ...

Mulka said goodbye inwardly to the suitcase and the dollars, dressed in old clothes to go to the bathhouse as the experienced prisoners generally did, and began washing his hands in the wooden bowl, then his face, then his hands ...

Night had fallen. Mulka tensed in readiness. When the guard, pacing to and fro, turned his back, Mulka leapt over a wooden post and found himself outside. The railroad tracks led him to the loaded coal cars which had arrived from Poland. Mulka made himself a niche in the piles of coal. He was not the only one. The vagrant children and youths who travel in the coal cars the length and breadth of that vast land, living on charity but also not above stealing, accepted him into their company with no questions and no demands; they had long since learned the rules of the game: Say nothing unless someone tries to hurt you ...

In this fashion, Mulka spent a companionable night, and the next day and

half the next night; then the train stopped on the outskirts of Vilna. What luck! Under cover of darkness, he made his way home, avoiding the patrols and the vagrants both.

I took from their hiding place his papers in the name of Pinchas Dembovsky. Mulka once again became Pavlik.

Would they look for him in Brest? Perhaps in Lvov, where he was supposedly inducted? They knew nothing about Vilna. Mulka went back to doing his job. He reported to the *ma'on* his failure to salvage the dollars.

“Send money ...”

■ ■ ■

Kopel viewed the problem of the Holocaust orphans as central, or nearly so, to his future work in Lvov. Mulka viewed it as secondary. All the field activists had been instructed clearly that if they chanced upon orphaned Holocaust survivors or Jewish children living with Christians, they had a duty to get them to Poland. In a few cases, we “stole” children from orphanages. I remember one mother who returned from Germany and was referred to us. She had found her daughter—and we returned the child to her. Evidently there were a few more such cases.

Esther, who did this sort of work, told me about a widow, a mother of seven, who had adopted another child who had lost his family. Esther urged that we handle all of them explicitly as “Holocaust orphans,” and she made a touching case, using a little irony: And if they have a mother, must you punish them because only their father died? And if they managed, like you, to flee the Nazis—you think that should make them ineligible?

To postpone the moment of decision a little longer, I asked Esther to have the widow come see me.

Rivka Glass appeared in our basement with the eight children—seven she had borne herself, and one adopted. She held the youngest in her arms. The others lined up, apparently by age, in a single row, as if at roll call.

I looked at them and mused about the burdensome task this woman had, to raise eight children alone in such difficult times. But how would we ship a “kindergarten” like this? They would suspect us. Who, at the border, would believe it was one family? And there would be plenty of other problems ... I decided we would have to help her—no doubt she was in financial straits—but to set out for the border with all that baggage?

“What is it like, to raise such a brood?” I asked her conversationally. “I imagine it’s not easy, eh? Food, clothing—and winter is coming in a few months. Shoes alone must cost a fortune ...”

Rivka contradicted me: “The Lord be praised, we manage ...”

“How? Who helps?”

"I won't try to dissemble here, sir. I buy medicines in Vilna, and sell them in some village that does not have even a pharmacist, and take foodstuffs from there to Vilna, and so it goes ... I did not come about that, sir. Esther says that you can arrange for us to leave here and get to Poland and from there to *Eretz Yisrael*. That's why I came ..."

My mind begins to grasp the problem. Or at least it seemed to. She wants to get to Palestine, like me. Why did I suspect her of other motives? But how could we send her with these eight little ones? The eldest was a girl of only twelve—how would I explain to the mother that I don't want to put her or her children in danger, and that the children are liable to attract undue attention?

"I'll tell you the truth. I am afraid you won't agree, but a family with eight young children—we have never encountered such a thing. I am afraid you will all be at risk."

The woman listened silently.

"I'm afraid that we will have to divide you into three groups. We'll find a couple, among those leaving with us, and let them take your three oldest with them; then another two or three can leave with another couple. And after that, you can take the smallest ones with you to the border."

The woman nodded her agreement. And I went on, with suitable gravity:

"And what will happen if, after we send across the first three, or the five or six oldest, the route is blocked? The border might separate you from those who have already crossed—assuming they cross safely—and who knows if you will ever see them again ... No one can promise you that the crossings will continue until you are all in Poland."

To Poland. A warning light blinked in my bureaucratic brain: What?! They are not orphans. Why was I making things difficult for her, being cruel? Why? Because one must not endanger children. Maybe, from her standpoint, the enterprise was too lightly undertaken? She should have no illusions that we had any miraculous fixes.

The woman sat there thinking, the little one in her arms. Finally she straightened her back and told me quietly and confidently, as if she'd considered everything and made her decision: "Then at least the people taking them should be Jews."

"Hannah and her seven sons," we called Rivka. And we did it. They all reached their longed-for destination.

Why had I worried that she would not accept my "conditions"?

Hah! A Jewish woman from Lithuania!

On June 22, Ilka Zaiden, "our man in Riga," was arrested. Three *Betar* people were arrested with him.

Remember that Ilka and his sister Dora and her daughter were unable to leave

the bedside of Ilka and Dora's dying mother. Under the circumstances, we put Ilka in charge of things in Riga, the city from which many of our immigrants came.

I do not recall that Ilka had any problems in his contacts with our comrades. He was one of the most senior members of the movement and our people had a lot of faith in him. We could always ask him or one of the activists we knew to check if so-and-so was ready to leave for Palestine, and most of our former comrades in the movement, those who had survived, were taken care of.

Because we really did not know the *Betar* people well enough, and since during the war years our people had almost no contact with them, we set up a "pipeline" to direct them to us via people we thought would be acceptable to their constituency. Perhaps we erred. Perhaps we were networking with the wrong people. In any event, things went very slowly.

Another reason for our failure to include the *Betar* movement, which had many loyal members, had to do with the fact that several of their members managed to get out of the Soviet Union immediately after Riga was liberated from the Nazis—on their own, individually, without leaving a thread that those left behind could follow.

Were we privileged thanks to our collectivist education, or was it that they did not have someone like Mulka of their own?

When he was contacted by Herman Gurvich from *Betar*, Ilka gave him the usual instructions, but he was delayed by health problems requiring treatment. Meantime the *Betar* people learned that one of theirs had transgressed: Eli Blenkenfeld, another of theirs, had to disappear from Riga to avoid arrest. Eli was sent to us—and reported to me dressed as a security agent, a pistol bulging from his back. We confiscated the weapon and hid it (in case we needed it for the "green route") and exchanged his showy clothes for something more modest. He crossed to Poland safely.

The foul-up in Riga was serious: Together with Ilka and Herman, two more *Betar* people were arrested: Gika Herzenberg and Abba-Itcha Lifshitz.

News from Riga was fragmentary. The source of our information was Mulka's sister Ruth, who was in contact with Ilka's sister Dora. In addition to caring for her sick mother and her little daughter, Dora now shouldered the additional burden of an imprisoned brother.

We tried to be "objective" in our concern for all those detained in Lvov and in Riga. We felt the pain of each of them. But when you know the prisoner, and he's also your friend, his disaster bothers you more than that of his comrades, despite their being just as loyal and dedicated and deserving of attention.

We knew that, in Lvov, a young woman had been arrested: Zhenya, who went there on a mission to rescue her comrades. We knew that a lengthy prison term would be harder for her than for the men. We also knew the names of the other

prisoners in Lvov, and all or most of them were clearly committed to the idea of *aliya* and entitled to our fullest attention. And yet, for us the Lvov case centered on but one name: Kopel!

Kopel was the law in Riga. We were not personally acquainted with the prisoners in Riga, but we were well acquainted with Ilka, and although we did not doubt the loyalty of the others, our major worry was over the one who had been emblematic for us: Ilka Zaiden.

I took the train to Riga and stayed in the apartment of friends. I had a substantial sum to utilize, as far as it would go. I tried to gather information about the investigation in progress. After a week or so, Mulka also came to Riga, but the results of our stay there were nil. The investigation continued, and the little we were able to learn did not bode well. After about two weeks, we had to return empty-handed.

We deemed it best not to travel together on the train. We'd been known in Riga since childhood as a pair. We thought to rent a car but were unable to find a driver with a travel order to Vilna. Mulka had a brilliant idea without any prospects of success but nonetheless entertaining. "Come on," he said, "let's go to the airport. Maybe we'll be able to get seats on a plane." This was a crazy notion, that ordinary folk like us, without any of public-party-bureaucratic-governmental status, might fly in routine fashion from one city to another in the Soviet Union in those days. But Mulka thought we could bribe a pilot.

When we got to the Riga airfield, we saw a plane on which some workers were loading furniture ... Our first and only guess: Some senior-echelon bureaucrat or general—at the very least—was travelling with his family to wherever he'd been assigned. We approached and asked casually, "Where to?" One of the porters blurted, "To Vilna ..."

This answer was too good. Was it a trap? We went up to the young man who seemed to be in charge of the area and asked him when this plane was leaving for Vilna. "In fifteen minutes," he replied. We immediately began calculating in whispers how much of a bribe might be required, and opened noncommittally with, "Maybe we could join you?" Again, miraculously, the response was affirmative. We asked casually (so we could, if need be, deny responsibility by claiming that we were only joking), "And how much would such a flight cost, for two?" The surprising response was very simple: "Go to the ticket window and buy tickets. They know the price ..."

We would never have thought of doing that!

The plane was transporting theater sets for a performance in Vilna. The flight attendant gave us seats and we landed at our destination within an hour.

Wonders never cease. But we were powerless to save Ilka and his comrades. Or the Lvov people.

■ ■ ■

Rivka, Lesik Shlomovitz's sister, came to Vilna to join her younger sister Doba. The two waited in vain for an opportunity to leave, which their brother was supposed to be organizing. The days went by and the boredom intensified. Rivka began pestering Lesik to find her something to do.

Rivka:

... I arrived in Vilna. I went to the Rafsons' house. I asked for Pavlik. A young man with a black mustache walked out toward me, wearing boots—he did not make a good impression. I was a little afraid. There was a meeting going on in the room. Sitting there were Mulka, Yaka, Mishka and a few other guys. They talked, they argued, and meantime the woman of the house brought them some beans, which they ate hastily, continuing to argue. When we were done, only three of us remained: Mulka, Yaka and me. They asked me about my work in Riga and I told them that I had worked in the municipal office that gave out ration cards. After that they told me that in Lvov there were prisoners and that we needed to get these comrades out of prison—or at least, to find out what had happened there.

Rivka unhesitatingly took on the job of accompanying Mulka. The two of them travelled on the same train, in separate carriages, but made sure to keep each other in view. They arrived in Lvov in the evening and decided that each would go to a different hotel. They also decided that they would meet during the day, every two hours, at predetermined locations.

Rivka found room at a hotel, but when she met Mulka some two hours later, it turned out that he had been unsuccessful. It was not easy at that time to find hotel accommodations unless you were someone whose position made ignoring you impossible. Thanks to a "little gift," Rivka was able to obtain lodging for Mulka in the hotel where she was staying.

The next morning, Rivka went to look for the address she had been given. Mulka followed at a distance. She went into the house and went to the room where the Strashina was supposed to be living, and found a woman there. Rivka said to her, "I am Esther from Vilna" and added that her friend would like to meet with the Strashina.

The two met that same day. Feeling his way, Mulka asked for details from the prison and listened to the version his interlocutor chose to provide.

A day or two later, the clerk at the hotel's reception desk told Rivka she had an admirer stalking her—"some blond guy." Rivka realized that she was being followed, smiled at the clerk as if to say "So let him, why not?" and added that she knew who it was.

That same day—after his meetings with the Strashina—Mulka, too, discovered he had a tail. Once again there was not the slightest doubt about the man's betrayal.

At their next prearranged meeting at the post office, Mulka walked by Rivka, whispering to her that they were following him and telling her where to meet him next. Rivka was not being followed all the time, but she knew that, at the hotel, a man was watching her arrivals and departures.

Mulka accomplished the first part of his mission. The story told by the Strashina, the overtones, the contradictions between his story to Mulka and what he had told Leibl and Isaac, were conclusive: he was a traitor. Now Mulka had to lose the surveillance. They never let up; he had the impression that they were not planning to arrest him immediately and that their intention was to uncover his contacts and find out more about who was involved in the affair. It was a campaign of attrition.

Mulka walked around the streets of Lvov. He bought a newspaper and strolled to the city park, where he sat on an empty bench and read the news, the editorial, the longwinded speeches by Soviet leaders. Two detectives sat in the park, too, at a certain distance. As time went by, they increasingly showed signs of fatigue born of inactivity. When Mulka sensed that their attention had wandered, he stood up and walked very slowly through a certain quarter of the city where there were numerous small buildings haphazardly arranged in no discernible order, went into the yard of one building and disappeared into the outhouse. He could hear the voices of the two men tailing him, asking the neighbors if they'd seen a man wearing spectacles and an army shirt. No one had seen him. The old system of building toilets outside the houses was useful to fugitives. From his hiding place, Mulka heard the exasperated voices of his followers, fainter now as they entered the yard next door. Mulka, cautiously and under cover of darkness, came outside and walked in the other direction.

He did not find Rivka.

To the train station! Hurry and get on a train that would take him back to Vilna. Run!

Rivka understood that disaster had arrived, that Mulka had been arrested. How could she get out of the hotel without arousing the suspicions of those tailing her?

Rivka left her suitcase in her room, went down to the lobby and told the reception clerk: "I'll be back in a little while. If that suitor of mine shows up, the dark one with glasses, tell him to wait for me. I'll be right back."

Let the detectives wait—for her and for Mulka.

Rivka:

... I did not find Mulka. It was already dark outside. At the train

station, there were no lights on—the austerity of the war years still reigned. The last meeting and the one before that had not taken place as planned. Mulka did not show up. I decided to send word home that “a son was born,” but I did not write the telegram correctly—I wrote the address in the blank section and the clerk handed the form back to me. I felt unable to write it again and asked the clerk to do it for me. Then I felt that someone behind me was trying to light a match and see my face. I had to stop myself from shouting—“Pavlik!” I saw him move away, through the tunnel, hurrying, almost running, and I ran after him. We got to the train that was standing there and boarded the first carriage we could. It was completely dark.

The train pulled out. If only we could make it safely back!

In Stryj the Shlomovitz family had an acquaintance. When Mulka went with the ticket and the travel permit to Stryj, it was a maneuver planned to deceive: If someone checked where they were going, they could mention this acquaintance of Rivka's. At the young man's house, Rivka related their story, with a few omissions ... She did not know the landlady, so she told her that she had almost been caught trading in foreign currency, to insure that the woman would not turn her in. Foreign currency is not political.

On the way back from Stryj, they went through Lvov again. Rivka remembered that in a corner of the stove in her room at the hotel, she had left some forms that they might need. She had the room key with her, not having returned it when she fled the hotel. Now she went back, a scarf hiding her face, and slowly opened the door to the room where she had stayed. The current lodgers were asleep and did not wake up, not even when Rivka opened the door to the stove as if she were going to sweep out the ashes, removed the forms and thrust them into her pocket. Then she left as quietly as she had come.

The two of them returned safely to Vilna.

A neighbor of Yekutiel Shor's had family in Lvov. From them Yekutiel heard that one of the family was serving in Lvov as an officer in a counterintelligence unit. More than likely he would know something about our prisoners, so Yekutiel went to Lvov, visited with his neighbor's relatives from Riga and, meantime, with the officer as well. He got the impression, however, that the man knew nothing of our comrades; or he might have been pretending not to know. Counterintelligence people know the price of leaking information to unauthorized persons, so they are hard to “crack.”

With our friends imprisoned in Lvov, we could not rest. At a certain point, a plan was put forward to send me to stay in Lvov with the family of the “coun-

terintelligence agent,” on the excuse that “the sensitive pianist from Riga” is suffering from the pangs of unrequited love and wants to go to Lvov or some other distant city, to forget his sorrow. Neither I nor Mulka thought the idea would work.

Yekutiel, who stayed for a few days in Lvov, met there with the “head of the community” and encouraged him to do something to help the prisoners, but it was clear that even the head of the community knew little about our prisoners, and it was doubtful if he could even get food to them.

Chaim Sher was appointed to keep track of events in Lvov and to try to help there in the future. He tried to find an “auntie” for the prisoners who would, at least, be able to supply them with food, but even that proved very difficult.

Rivka left again on a mission. We equipped her with new ID documents—from Bussia Tzentsiffer, who had already crossed the border.

Rivka:

I don't resemble her. Bussia had been to university and in her documents there were a few addresses. I was unable to memorize them. On the train, two men sat opposite me and looked at me: I thought they were following me, and decided that if I were asked, I would say that I have no papers. I stuck Bussia's documents into the sliding window of the train. In the end, I made friends with the two of them and learned that I need not be afraid of them. That evening, we arrived in Lvov. I was very tired. I wanted to sleep. I looked for a hotel but did not find one. No one would give me lodging. At the train station, I saw a young woman wandering around, who looked to me like a whore. I asked her about finding a place to lodge, and she told me that she was looking for a woman willing to wash the floor in the dining room at the officers' club. As payment, I could eat in the kitchen. I washed the floor, I ate, and I sat down next to the stove and fell asleep. I knew that no one would check my identity there. In the morning, feeling better, I went into the city and found a hairdresser.

From there, Rivka went to the family she had been asked to rescue, but she saw a suspicious-looking man at the entrance to the building, so she did not go in. She asked a girl she met on the street to go into the building and ask the tenants in the family's apartment to come down, but they did not. Rivka sent the girl upstairs again and asked her to tell the tenants that Rivka Shlomovitz was looking for them. They did not come down that time, either. She did not give up. She bought

the girl a toy and sent her again. In vain. The only choice was to go up herself. In the flat, she found eight people, including the couple from Tashkent she was looking for. They were petrified. Rivka gave them money, as she had been asked to do, and an address in Vilna.

From there, she went to see the head of the community.

... I gave him a letter written on cigarette paper. The letter said that the Strashina was suspect. The head of the community was requested to help our comrades to gain their release and leave for Poland. After reading the letter, he said that he, too, suspected the Strashina. He added that he knew that the prisoners were behaving well—noting Kopel in particular—and added that they were being given a hard time ...

Rivka returned to Vilna. Her assignment was completed. Now she asked to be permitted to take her parents and leave. We agreed, of course. She left with them for a village in the Baranovich area, “organized” papers for everyone, and they all crossed safely over the border to Poland.

The couple whom Rivka had given our address in Vilna arrived. Within two days we had moved them across to Poland.

What made Rivka such a star in the underground? Who, or what, had helped her grow wings, she who seemed the embodiment of the anti-hero, of stifling domesticity, of shyness, always utterly apologetic ...

But perhaps this estimation is totally mistaken? Maybe in Rivka’s case, the book can’t be judged by its cover? Here she is, a Jewish girl from a small village, the sort of village that more educated and superior folk consider a swamp, a nest of ignorance, and here she is, like a flower unfolding, level-headed, taking her time, when tested by situations of which she has no experience whatever, has never even dreamed of, and she meets them intelligently, straightforwardly, determined not to be deflected from her goal.

The underground—it is an electrifying place. The very air is full of high tension. There is not the slightest room for the dull and the ordinary ...

There are some undergrounds that are not reached by descending but, on the contrary, by ascending. And the wings? Just as one leaps, they appear.

Kopel’s interrogation began immediately. After the Strashina had disappeared from the room, three investigators began “working him over” by turns, to keep him from sleeping, to wear him down—the customary method used by Soviet interrogators, known among experienced prisoners as “the windmill” because of the fine grinding it performs on its object.

Kopel:

... It was a very tough interrogation, and the woman interrogator was the worst. The interrogators knew a lot about us. I think the Strashina told them everything he knew. The woman interrogator would talk to me in Polish and when I could not answer her in that language, she would curse me and scream about how could I not know Polish if I am really Gersh Morbachek from Poland. I claimed to be a yeshiva student who never learned Polish. I never imagined that a woman could be so coarse, foul-mouthed and brutal. And she was actually the one who frequently beat me ... From the Strashina they had learned that I am Kopel Skop, but officially they treated me as Morbachek and this name stuck to me for the entire time. After three very hard days, they took me and David Pomerantz out of the cellars of the MAGAV [an acronym for Ministry of State Security] building, and a group of six soldiers surrounded us and led us to the district prison for political prisoners ... On the way, David whispered to me that he was feeling bad; he thought he would not be able to hold out, that his strength would give out and he would be liable to cause damage to the movement and the comrades still at liberty ... When we saw an electric [streetcar] go by on the road, David said he would try to commit suicide by jumping on the tracks. I encouraged him to hang on; I said: "Don't do anything foolish and don't talk that way ..." Even if he tried to kill himself, he wouldn't succeed. The soldiers would prevent him ...

They brought us to the prison. It was a terrible feeling. I have never been in prison. I don't think my father or grandfather were, either ... Large gates swung open, and when we went in, another large iron door opened, in two parts. I thought: I'm going in here, but I'm not going to come out ... They undressed us completely and did a thorough search of our belongings and a body search. They checked, made notes, cut all the hair on our body and cut off the buttons on our clothes. The belts had been taken during the first interrogation. I parted from David.

Kopel was put into the cell, fearing for his life. Before his imprisonment, he had heard about the cruelty of the criminal prisoners toward the weaker prisoners and especially about the bitter fate of the Jews among them. To his surprise, he found himself in a cell with a lot of Ukrainians, who welcomed him hospitably. There was also a priest among them, who gave him food and reassured him. Like all new prisoners, Koppel refused to reveal to his new comrades what his "crime" had been and claimed that he was imprisoned by mistake and that things would soon be cleared up and he would be released. Doubtless his cellmates, who had

already been through the first shock and recognized this as a common strategy of self-defense, typical of most newly-arrived prisoners, were tolerant of the optimism evinced by their novice comrade. Kopel also met a few Jews in the cell, Holocaust survivors who had been accused of collaboration with the Nazis.

Kopel:

... I was accused under Article 54 of the Ukrainian criminal statutes; I have forgotten the number of the subsidiary paragraph, but it talked about an "attempt to sever a portion of the territory of the Soviet Union." I asked: Steitsch? [How?, meaning what?, in Yiddish]. What is this I wanted to sever? And then the interrogator said to me: "You must understand, we do not have a paragraph for every detail. Let's say you steal chickens, then you steal a horse, or, let's say, a suitcase, then what? For every item people steal—a special paragraph? They use the "theft" paragraph." I laughed. A few days later, he notified me that they had added paragraph 4—"contact with the international bourgeoisie," or "collaboration" with it, and indeed this paragraph remained right to the end ...

The first interrogations were very hard and rough and they used force. Later on, they stopped the beatings. I don't know, maybe they started to like me or it wasn't necessary anymore ... I had long conversations with him ... I don't know, just as I had always related to people all my life, I thought that despite everything he was still a human being, and is not doing what he is doing for the fun of it. This interrogator did not make a bad impression on me, and I decided to explain things to him. I think that the change in his attitude toward me came after we had an argument, a kind of dialogue. He said to me, "Why did you go into the lion's den and stick your head in its mouth? You should have known that you had no chance ..." We had a long conversation about Zionism and its aims. He was a young guy, maybe 24 to 28, and it was obviously his first meeting with a Zionist. When he asked me why I had gone into the lion's den, I said, "Why are you asking me a question like that? Would you have asked Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya [a fighter in the anti-German underground during the occupation, caught by the Nazis and executed, later a symbol of national heroism and struggle in the Soviet Union-Transl.] why she went where she went? ... "

When telling me about this response of his, Kopel looked at me as if awaiting some kind of reply. He had opened his heart to me, and I felt myself sinking with

him into that strange, locked world bordered by the four walls of a prison cell in Lvov. Did he think I would find it funny? Burst out laughing at him? Zoya? Zoya who had been beatified by torture after sacrificing herself, as it were, on the altar of the homeland during the Nazi wartime invasion? Today we know how the Soviet Union made “holy war martyrs,” “heroes of Socialist labor,” “organizers of the underground against the occupiers,” and all of that ...

No, no; I did not laugh. Maybe I, too, needed this explanation from the dialogue with this young novice serving in the temple of Soviet internal security, and not just to open his eyes, and not just to undermine the armor of lies they had made him wear.

What is the point of wondering how they butchered the soul of a young man who may have been, by nature, a bit naïve? After reporting in the notes he prepared for the secret file on the “insolent replies by the agent of Zionist imperialism,” did anything at all of what the accused—a strange one indeed—had said, remain in his heart? And on the other hand, what possible benefit could have accrued to the accused from any case he made within the four walls of the cell?

No, it did not make me smile ... Partly because Kopel was a preacher by nature, and maybe couldn’t help himself; always in quest of justice and righteousness and everything that comes under the heading of “values”; and also because the whole exhortation—your credo—is the weapon of the weak, resorted to when you’re alone at the end, the end of the line ... clearly a defensive weapon, that might scratch the skin of the enemy—and perhaps ease things for Kopel ...

... And the yearning to have your say, to speak, which had been taken from you even while you were still at liberty, the chance to speak your piece even if no one heard: a kind of “I have had my say, and now do with me what you will ...”

And further concerning lessons in Zionism, heard by the young interrogator in the Soviet security service from the mouth of one charged with “collaboration with the international bourgeoisie”:

... Just as Zoya left, knowing she would not return, treading the path she felt duty-bound to follow in order to save her people and her homeland, so I, too, saw what I was doing as the only way to do something for my persecuted people ...

I understand, Yaka, that you see this argument as a bit naïve. But it was natural to behave thus ... In all these interrogations, I used in my defense the aspect of the tragedy that befell the Jewish people. He also asked me why we don’t want Birobidzhan [the Soviet region set aside in 1928 as a Jewish settlement area pursuant to Soviet policy on national minorities], why it has to be Palestine precisely. I told him: “Will you permit me to ask you a question?” And he said, “All

right, ask.” “Let’s suppose,” I said, “that you conquered the world, you conquered Berlin and it’s in your hands, and you know that Berlin is more beautiful and a nicer place to live than Moscow, and let’s say they said to you: Make Berlin your capital and leave Moscow for someone else—I don’t know, would you be agreeable to that? So that’s how you can understand why it has to be Eretz Yisrael, Palestine, and not Birobidzhan ...” In brief, I told him things that I learned in the movement over the years. I want to tell you, Yaka, that I had the impression that this goy understood me, because once, during an interrogation, he said to me: “You know? Whether you are right or wrong—ten years is the minimum you will get ... ”

A hackneyed joke that made the rounds of the camps:

Camp commandant: “Prisoner Ivanov, what is your sentence?”

Ivanov: “25 years in the camps ... ”

Commandant: “What for crime?”

Ivanov: “For nothing at all, Commandant.”

Commandant: “Nonsense. For nothing, the sentence is only ten years.”

David was in a cell on the floor above Kopel’s. The plumbing pipes were their “telephone line.” The prisoners discovered that, when one of them spoke into the toilet bowl and the other one “on the line” put his head into the bowl in his own cell, they could hear each other. Sometimes they were able to exchange notes. Ukrainian women prisoners would send the notes down from the top floor on a string with a small rock or some other weight attached to the end. Sometimes they would send their friends a handmade cross. When they knew that a Jew was in the cell below, they got sophisticated and sent a Star of David made of bread kneaded and molded with their fingers ... and letters and objects would be sent back in the same way. This was prisoner solidarity, which was stronger even than all the spilled blood that had soaked the land ...

Once, David sent me a message that he was feeling bad because he was beaten severely by the interrogator. He even wrote the interrogator’s name—and it was my interrogator. I don’t know, maybe it was a foolish thing to do, but when I was brought for interrogation afterwards, I went in and said to him:

“I thought you were a civilized person. How can you permit yourself to beat prisoners?”

“Beat whom?”

“David!”

“How do you know that?”

“What do you care how? It’s a disgrace!”

I said what I said—and I am sure that it helped David. I don’t know whether I was equal to the experiment, or not. I’m not the one who can judge, but I had a lot of time to think ... When we went out on a job, they told us [in case of capture] not to say we were Zionists: We were to insist right to the end that we did what we did for profit, out of greed. I couldn’t. I don’t think anyone could, because that was the hardest thing. Firstly, when they arrested me, I knew in my heart that I would not come out of this thing alive. I was done for. I was going to die. It was clear to me. There was no way I could master myself and lie about this, even if that had been possible; and anyway it wasn’t, because the Strashina had told them everything ... I did not want to die like a thief ... I thought about it at night, when I couldn’t fall asleep, before the interrogations and during the interrogations ... If the day ever comes that they open the archives—naïve thoughts like that would go through my mind—why should they find in the notes that the Jews did this for money, for financial profit? If I was destined to die, I wanted to die as who I am, not as someone else. I cannot say that this was the reason, but yet it was one of the reasons why I behaved as I did in all the interrogations and all my conversations with the interrogator ...

Kopel did not tell them, of course, about the center at Vilna nor did he mention names and addresses, but it was clear to him that the Strashina had told everything he knew. Kopel could not remember whether they had asked about his Latvian origins; it is quite possible that, at that stage, they knew nothing about it. If I review my own interrogations and compare them with those of Kopel, what emerges is that the interrogators in Lvov did not do very professional work; in their defense, as it were, one could say that the pressure on them was intense and because they were able to bring that investigation to a close in a satisfactory way, they took shortcuts. Their workload was heavy—Lvov and its environs was an arena for armed struggle by nationalist Ukrainians against the Soviet regime during the post-war period. So they stitched together the file on the Jews any which way, as the young interrogator so aptly put it: “Whether you are right or not—either way, you’ll get ten years.”

■ ■ ■

Zhenya Kless.

A traditional Jewish home, in the Baranovich vicinity. Parents who speak He-

brew. The *Tarbut* (Zionist-Hebrew) school. From childhood, following her brother Shlomo, a member of *Hashomer Hatzair*. Then in a *gar'in hachshara* (pre-*aliya* training group) in Slonim.

When the Russians came, after the division of Poland between the Soviets and the Nazis, the uprooted family relocated to Sarni. The beginnings of the underground. Contact with people in the movement. Expectations of a small window opening a way to Palestine via Vilna or Romania. In vain. The routes were blocked.

Her parents and sister were killed in the war and the Holocaust. Zhenya fled deep into Russia and from there to Central Asia. Groups of *Hashomer Hatzair* and Dror members had gathered there. Rumor had it that someone had tried to cross the border into Persia and been caught, that many had been caught. Zhenya moved from place to place, changed her name, searched for friends. She was briefly imprisoned in Namangan in 1944, when the authorities were looking for her brother. Early on, she learned to keep her mouth shut when beaten. And the beatings were severe. After some four days, she escaped so that she could warn the others about prison.

The war had not yet concluded—but Zhenya was already moving westward. From Lvov, a door opened to Poland; crossing the border became possible. And from Poland, there was a chance to get to Palestine.

Zhenya:

... In Lublin, we found Abba Kovner with the guys from Vilna, from Bialystok, and there were also some partisans from Russia. We did not wait for the total liberation of Poland. We began right away looking for a route to go further. Someone went to check possibilities in Romania. We were about forty people, the first group. We passed Munkacs and reached Bucharest. We split up, going to different places for training. In Romania, we waited for Anya who would take about five hundred immigrants, maybe a thousand. We waited and waited and then heard that the route to Italy was open and the chances were better there; so we set out again. We were almost arrested, but we made it to Budapest. I crossed the Hungarian-Romanian border a few times, between Budapest and Bucharest. Some of the others headed for Yugoslavia to check what could be done there. So we were moving around all the time. Looking for a way to Palestine. We had different ID papers for each country ... Then I went back to Poland. Why? It occurred to me that we ought to be getting people out of the Soviet Union. One guy went there and came back safely, and they said that more should be sent. I presented myself as a candidate. I already had a certificate, but I gave it up. I went back to Warsaw and

from there, to Lodz. I arranged my own papers to cross the border. I got the money, a hundred dollars, from Yosef Meller. My documents said I was a demobilized soldier returning to the place where I'd been conscripted, Central Asia, to look for family members. My name? Yozefa Dratva.

... My role was to get our friends out of there. To give them money to get as far as Poland, to explain to them how they could get out, to encourage them. Some people did not even know about the repatriation scheme. I had about twenty addresses and around 150,000 rubles. In dollars. I had repatriation papers already completed, with only the person's name to be filled in.

I set out with Yerachmiel. I knew that Avraham Esset, whom I also knew, and Kopel were in Lvov. I knew that Vilna was also a bricha jumping off point. I had no problem crossing the border. In Lvov, I remembered the apartment at 10 Sloneczna Street, where I was supposed to meet Avraham and the Strashina. On March 10, I went there. I had bleached my hair and was not a blonde. The arrests in the city had already been made. Avraham was still at liberty. The Strashina told us how he had been released. I was cautious. He said that he needed money to rescue the comrades in jail. I felt that I should get out of the apartment and asked Avraham to arrange some other lodging for me. I met the young woman whose husband had been imprisoned on criminal charges. I knew her from before. Then it turned out that she, too, had had a hand in the betrayal. Maybe she thought she could save her husband that way ...

On the evening of March 10, I gave the Strashina 30,000 rubles to rescue our comrades, and the next day I wanted to resume travelling. But there was no train that day, and on March 12 in the evening I was arrested in the room on Sloneczna Street. I was there, and Avraham and that young woman were there ... You say that Yankel Hefetz was also there? That could be ... Yes, he sat in the corner, by the little table. They came in, very confident, went straight to the cupboard, and searched under the clothes. They knew where to look. In the suitcase, they found a tube of toothpaste. They did not touch the young woman's suitcase. They took my documents and asked why I had not reported to military headquarters. I told them that I would go. I took the suitcase to leave, but the man said it wasn't necessary; he would see to it. We went out. I saw Yerachmiel—they were bringing him, too. The interrogation began that same night. They beat us. This went on for a few days. Beatings. I was in shock. I realized that they were talking to me, but I could not answer even if I had wanted to.

Inwardly something was telling me that I would not get out of there; that I had to accept death for what it was ... this went on for four or five days, and then there was a turning point. They said they knew I wasn't Yozeфа but Zhenya Frankel. Only the young woman knew this name ... My interrogator was Jewish. Very cruel. The interrogators would alternate. Afterwards they brought me on a stretcher to a different prison. In the subsequent interrogations, they wanted to know who had sent me, who gave me the money, who the heads of the Zionist movement in Russia were, what they were planning to do. I stuck to my story—I was trying to find my husband in Central Asia. They would tell me that they don't need any proof; that they have all the information necessary to convict me ...

On June 26, 1946, Gersh Morbachek (i.e., Kopel Skop), David Pomerantz, Zhenya Frankel (i.e., Zhenya Kless), Yerachmiel Yanovsky, Yosef Neiman, Zalman Shenberg, Avraham Esset and Shmuel Englesberg were brought before the military tribunal of the Lvov district. Shmulik had no connection with the affair on account of which the group was being charged; in any case, that was the claim in court.

Kopel:

... The trial was held in a room at the prison. It lasted one day and ended the day after. A captain presided, along with two lieutenants. There was also a secretary. Since Yosef Neiman's wife was in Lvov, she hired a lawyer and he defended the other accused as well, since he could not defend just one of them. The charge was collective. There was no plaintiff ... All, I think, were similarly accused under Article 54/4: "A connection with the international bourgeoisie." My impression was that the presiding captain was drunk the entire time. He barely let anyone else open their mouths. "This is no place for speeches," he explained. So why did the thing take longer than a day? Because first they fill out a detailed questionnaire for each of the accused: Who are you, who is your father and all that—material that is already in the file but is recorded again anyway. And each of the accused wants to say something, but the judge cuts them off, saying, "I will put you immediately into solitary confinement." Nevertheless, we tried to speak—each of us began making a Zionist statement, and he would silence us, saying, "There's nothing to hear. I know you are guilty." The defense attorney produced the pamphlet by Solomon Mikhoels and Itzik Feffer—the two Jews from the Jewish

Anti-Fascist Committee who went to America during the war to raise money and enlist support for the Soviet Union. The pamphlet stated that the Zionists in the United States received the two cordially. The attorney wanted, evidently, to prove in this fashion that Zionism is not fascism, and hence that we were not fascists. His defense was quite wretched. He called me “the emisar”—emissary—of the Zionist Histadrut. The others were also “emissaries,” “Zionists,” “Zionist propagandists,” and so forth. They did not suggest we had done things we didn’t do. David and I were given ten years and our property was confiscated. Zalman—in consideration of his army service—received eight years; Zhenya and Avraham, also eight; Yerachmiel, six; Shmulik, four; Yosef Neiman, two. We all protected Yosef; we tried to persuade the judge that he had nothing to do with the group, that he was not a Zionist, that he was interested only in financial gain.

Zhenya smiles and says:

... The trial? We all met there. The mood was better by then. They stopped torturing and beating us. We knew there would be some kind of change ... Kopel started trying to persuade them that Zionism can’t be fascist. I begged him in a whisper to stop—he wouldn’t persuade them, but only make things harder for himself, because the more he showed himself to be politically knowledgeable, the more dangerous he would seem to them ... we sat there a whole day, and then they put us all together—me and the men—in one cell.

... And there’s something else I want to say—about David. Nothing was proven against him. They asked him one question: Was he a Zionist, and why? So he told them: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget [its cunning] ...” The judge requested a translation into Russian. They translated it for him, and he said that the man was beyond help.

Later, when Yosef Neiman had served his “brief” sentence, popularly known as “a kindergarten sentence,” he decided to journey to the capital to meet with Israel’s envoy in Moscow, Mrs. Golda Meyerson [Golda Meir].

His brief experience in diplomacy then cost Yosef another sentence of twenty-five years’ imprisonment in a remote forced labor camp.

After the trial, all the men were returned to one large cell with many other prisoners—perhaps a hundred, or even more. The crowding was terrible. While some of the prisoners slept, the others had to stand.

There, everyone could tell his story to the others.

Kopel:

... It seemed to me that Yerachmiel's situation was the worst of all. He had a leg wound. He said they had tortured and beaten him a lot. The interrogator liked to kick him in the legs, which became swollen. The guys looked really bad. They looked puffy. We received no parcels. We began demanding to get out of there and be transferred to the camps, since we had been sentenced to work camps in remote area of the Soviet Union. We knew that things would be no better in the camps, but we could not stand to go on sitting in jail. When they did not respond, we went on a hunger strike. They put us in solitary confinement and then, I think, they transferred us to somewhere called Zlochov: the prison there was in some monastery or fortress. From there—to a transit camp in Lvov, a huge camp that looked like a whole city. We stayed there with thousands of people, political prisoners and criminals.

An ordinary transit camp—filthy, lawless, with an air of impermanence. The criminals tried to dominate the political prisoners and the ordinary civilians imprisoned there. The political prisoners organized and fought back. More than once somebody died. Sometimes a confrontation ended with a compromise; then, after a time, the violence erupted again: a world ruled absolutely by the strong. A world where you learned how to survive, where—generally—you parted with the last remnants of your private “property”—like a shirt, or shoes, or trousers ... Some sonafabitch would covet a photo of your wife, which you had managed to bring safely through all the trials and tribulations and searches ... And you might gladly give your socks for a slice of bread or a bit of tobacco ...

“This is how you loosen the bonds of damned capitalism,” you’ll hear from someone, smiling bitterly, who used to be the editor of a district party journal or a lecturer on Marxism-Leninism.

Nehemia Gross was a friend of Zvi (later “Alexander”) Netzer’s from the days of Grochov—a training kibbutz near Warsaw, in the years before the war, where the two of them were preparing for *aliya*. The upheavals of September 1939 brought Zvi to Vilna and Nehemia to the Belorussian village of Lida. Along with others, they took part in arranging for members of the pioneering movements to leave Polish territory, conquered by the Soviets, to Vilna, capital of independent Lithuania. From Vilna—so they believed—somehow they would eventually make their way to Palestine via a Europe that was going up in flames.

That year, the winter was particularly cruel and getting people from the Soviet Union to Lithuania was terribly difficult. At one point, Nehemia lost contact with

the center at Vilna, until he had no idea whether the people he was sending were reaching their destination.

Nehemia:

... The lack of money had its effect. I went to our center in Lida. I consulted the comrades and agreed that I would try to cross, arrange things on the other side and come back for a short time so I could be replaced. I said my farewells. I left two friends in my place. I assembled a group of ten people. We chose three guides from among the good ones ... The distance we had to cover was an estimated two hours' walk. Unexpectedly and unfortunately, the night was unusually cold for the region. The temperature dropped to 39 degrees below zero [-38.2 F]. There was a blizzard, and deep snow covered everything. We decided to set out anyway ... A narrow river, as deep as a man's height, was the border ... The ice broke—and we all sank into the water ...

Despite everything, they continued on their way, their goal the nearest way-station on the route to *Eretz Yisrael*—sovereign, friendly Lithuania, on whose soil the Zionist movement had flowered, where Hebrew schools had flourished ...

The Lithuanian border guards they met offered the frozen and exhausted young people help, and then returned them—as detainees!—to the Russians.

Nehemia and his comrades weathered the tribulations of imprisonment and of the long journey to the prison camp in the Arctic north to which they had been exiled. All of them survived. At the camp, a representative of the secret committee that was an adjunct to the Ministry of State Security informed them that, for their attempt to steal across the national border, they had been sentenced to five years' imprisonment.

Zvi left Vilna to meet Nehemia and his comrades, hoping to find them delayed and clarify what had befallen the people from Lida. He, too, was caught and sent north, although the two friends' paths diverged for a time. As a Polish citizen, Zvi was freed from the camp after the outbreak of war between the Soviet Union and Germany. Nehemia, who according to the forged documents then in his possession was a native of Lithuania—was, on that basis, kept in the camp.

On January 21, 1946, after five years hard labor, Nehemia was released. Released? Only from the actual prison where he had been incarcerated, but his punishment was not over. He was supposed to reside and work only within the boundaries of the Komi Autonomous Republic, nearly all of which was in the Arctic region; to earn a living, he found work in the local branch of a government

general supply company at the Kozhva train station. His job was “*expeditor*”—a combination mobile agent and local supervisor.

Despite the risk involved, Nehemia began corresponding with his friends in Ramat Hakovesh, Israel, and when Alexander went as an emissary from Palestine to Lodz, he also had with him Nehemia’s address in the far north; when he met with Mulka, he asked him to do “something” for his friend from Grochov—to bring him to Poland.

No less.

Shimon Bekin—Bebka—was our roving emissary for special assignments. The officer’s uniform he wore, his disability, his excellent command of Russian, and—above all—his own charisma, equipped him very well for building trust with all kinds of people and came in very handy during his journeys around the globe.

When we felt that our comrades in Tashkent were lagging behind, we sent Bebka there. Our thinking was that if they did not manage to help via the *shiduchim* [matches] we had arranged, to permit participation in the Polish repatriation process, Bebka would bring the people to us, to Vilna, and we would move them along on our own routes. We feared that the five young women and Gamli would miss the date, and get stuck in the Soviet Union.

Bebka’s journey to Tashkent was without incident. The news he brought from there was encouraging: The Tashkent affair was nearly concluded. Some of the comrades were already en route, and those still left were to leave in the next few days.

We relaxed a bit.

And who if not Bebka would be sent to the Komi Autonomous Republic, that forsaken Soviet land, most of whose residents were prisoners or wardens, and most of whose towns were labor camps, with armed soldiers on guard?

Bebka prepared for the long journey: From Vilna, he would go by boat to Moscow—a relatively easy trip—and there would stay with his friends from the university and sniff around; from Moscow, he would continue north via Kirov. We parted from him in the morning at the train station in Vilna. Shortly—an hour or two later—I noticed Bebka’s jacket, which had remained behind on the back of a chair ... In the pockets, we found the documents we had taken pains to organize for Nehemia along with nearly all Bebka’s own documents as well! Apparently, at the last moment, Bebka had chosen a different jacket to wear. If he were travelling only as far as Moscow, all right, he could manage on his own; but how would he continue north to an area overseen by the security services—without documents? Should we wait until he realized his error? Until he returned from Moscow? Or was there perhaps a way to get the documents to him?

Someone remembered that it was possible to rent a small airplane, with room for the pilot and one passenger. The authorities evidently saw this as a way of get-

ting some use out of the wartime “*kukuruznikim*” [“corn guys”]—small planes whose pilots had acquired their nickname by flying so low that they nearly touched the corn standing in the fields.

I hurried to the Vilna airfield and explained to the clerk that my brother had left that morning for Moscow for his university entrance examinations, and only now had I discovered that he had forgotten his papers; if he did not submit them immediately, he would lose an entire year; so I was prepared to rent a small plane despite the high cost—was it possible? And could he check for me at what train station I might intercept my brother?

The reply was positive. The cost of an hour’s flight, the pilot, the wait at the other end, and the return trip—such and such a sum of rubles; the place where I had the most reasonable chance of intercepting the train was at Minsk, the capital of Belorussia. The man quoted a substantial sum and I agreed “with a heavy heart” to pay it, muttering meanwhile some highly uncomplimentary things about my scatterbrained “brother”: Some “student”! Completely undependable! I’d knock some sense into him yet, the silly fool.

A barefoot boy of about twelve brought me to the pilot’s mess; a woman pilot maybe twenty years old sat there, intently eating some porridge. The boy brought both of us to the field and explained to the young woman that she should take that plane over there, behind the shack, and warned her not to forget to untie the rope at the front end. These learned explanations did not augment my faith in the technical capabilities of the mighty Soviet state, but since I had scant knowledge of flying and had flown very little myself, I put myself in her hands.

I sat in the rear seat, behind the pilot—and we took off. We rose aloft, skimming over green fields and villages; I saw below me the iron rails, and soon the pilot pointed out “my” train. She also suggested that I hold tight to my hat or it might blow away and land somewhere in Belorussia.

We landed at the Minsk airfield, where we were maneuvered into a far corner. Ground transport—none. I ran for quite a while to reach the main gate, but found no taxi there, either. The train station was fairly near, perhaps one and a half or two kilometers away, but time was working against me. I thrust a large sum of money at a passing truck driver and he girded up for the mission. We saw the train entering the station, stopping for a short time, huffing and puffing—and as the truck driver stopped alongside the rails, the last car passed me by ...

If only I’d had a taxi, I could have chased the train and caught it at the next station, Borisovo, where it was due in half an hour. I got out to look for a taxi or a truck, and offered the driver who had brought me there a really huge sum—but even so, he dared not set out without a travel permit. What a well-trained population! A year after the defeat of the enemy, hundreds of kilometers from the border—a driver cannot go 70 or 80 kilometers from the town where he lives,

on his own initiative! Consider what degree of sophistication we ourselves had reached in developing ways and means to allow our people to travel everywhere in every direction across such a huge country, whenever the need arose ...

But what now—go back to Vilna and from there, leave for Moscow? No. Precious time was elapsing, and Bebka might realize that his documents were not with him ... No, in the next few days we had to “close” the matter of rescuing Nehemia Gross so he could get to Poland.

I went back to the airfield, found the clerk in charge of rented aircraft and asked him to rent me a plane that could overtake the train I had just missed. He bent over his maps with his compasses and ruler, and pronounced his learned opinion: “That train, my friend, you can catch at the Orsha station. You should get to the nearby airfield about an hour before the train arrives at the station. This will cost you ... (he named a very large sum) which covers the aircraft and the pilot until tomorrow morning.”

I assented.

A few minutes later, a man came up to me and asked what “organization” would pay my expenses. The person asking, of course, was a local security officer. Suddenly I was tempted to poke fun at him and say, “These expenses will be covered by the organization known as *Bricha*”—he might think it was an abbreviation or an acronym for something ... but in the end, I told him the story about my loser of a brother who had forgotten his documents, etc. And how did I come to have such a large amount of money? Ah, what would I not do to make sure that my brother doesn’t lose a whole year?! The boy is a real mathematical genius, but who hasn’t met one of these geniuses without any common sense? It was fortunate that he hadn’t forgotten his trousers, the nitwit.

The man asked to see my papers. By all means, here they are ... ID card, *propiska*, student ID from the conservatory, exemption certificate from military service ... It was enough.

This time the plane was somewhat larger, and the pilot was male. We landed at an empty military airfield, 18 kilometers from the Orsha train station. I had one hour.

“A car? There are no cars here, comrade. This is an abandoned airfield, and only I, a soldier with my personal weapon, am here. No one else. You have to get to Orsha? Tomorrow. Every morning, a military bus goes by here. It will take you, too ... What? A horse and wagon? There are no villages or any *kolkhoz* in the vicinity ... You would be willing to buy a bicycle? Are you making fun of me? My dear comrade, in this area—who has a bicycle? Don’t worry, you can lie down here, in the corner, on the floor, and rest until tomorrow morning ... As you wish ... ”

In the morning, we went straight back to Vilna. I paid what I paid to the pilot—and my glossary of swear words acquired a few new fascinating entries.

The next day, I flew to Moscow. I found Bebka and thrust the documents into his hands.

“When did you notice that you had forgotten your documents?”

“About half an hour after the train left Vilna.”

“Why didn’t you come back?”

“I figured that you would do something at Vilna. It was a shame to waste the time. You came just in time ...”

“How did you manage to get to Moscow without documents, or a ticket?”

“One manages somehow ...”

Nehemia:

... After a year of work, I was entitled to 14 days of vacation [explains Nehemia], and for my excellent performance they added another ten days. I could also spend my holiday outside the area of my village in the Komi Autonomous Republic—in the city where I used to live. Since my “homeland district” was in Lithuania, near Vilna, I asked for an exit permit to go there on my holiday. I put in a request for a certain date, and until then I continued working. In work mode, meantime, I travelled to Vorkuta to fetch some goods. There, in Vorkuta, while I was making the rounds between offices and warehouses, they told me somewhere that “a lame demobilized soldier was looking for me. I didn’t pay much attention. When I was at the same place again, they repeated this: that someone was looking for me. When I had heard it at some other places as well, I became curious to know what was going on. In front of the entrance gates to one of the big warehouses, I noticed a young man who resembled the description I had been given in various places. The guy looked at me, and evidently decided that I resembled the character he wanted. He came up to me and asked, “Are you Yisrael Soloveichik?” That was my name in the camp. When I answered yes, he stuck out his hand, greeted me in Hebrew with “shalom,” and said: “I have regards for you from Zvi ...”

At that moment I suspected that the man might be a detective from the security services. The name Zvi is known to them from my correspondence and now they were trying to catch me out! I adopted an air of cool indifference and said that of course he was mistaken. I know no one by that name. He spoke my real name, which only increased my suspicions. I denied any connection with these people. At this point, I felt that the man was overcome with confusion. I felt a slight inward hesitation. After a few seconds, the man recovered, took out his watch, opened both covers, removed a scrap of paper folded appropriately, and gave it to

me. I read it—and my eyes lit up. There were six words there: “*Letzvi—meshek, minehemia—binyan, shalom ulehitra’ot*” [for Zvi—farm, from Nehemia—building—au reservoir].

“*Meshek—binyan*” [farm—building] was the password the two had used during their training at Grochov, when they stood guard over the area during the dark nights, in defense against anti-Semitic thugs who would come bursting out periodically and attack the comrades.

Nehemia had no more doubts. The man in front of him was a courier from Zvi.

Nehemia:

... when he got to my apartment in Kozhva, Bebka discovered that I was then in Vorkuta for my job. I had to collect various goods there, load them on rail cars and bring them to the camp. Because Bebka did not know me personally and did not know much about my status, he had to investigate cautiously. He presented himself to my landlady in Kozhva as my cousin and heard from her details about me and decided to travel to Vorkuta and find me there, trying to speed up our departure. It's easy to imagine but hard to describe my feelings once all my doubts were dispelled and the barriers between us fell. We hugged and kissed. My eyes filled with tears of joy. All at once, all the tribulations and the dangers vanished and my heart filled with pride and faith in the movement and in the comrades, who did not forget and who dared to take risks for one of their own. The chain was unbroken!

Nehemia was freed from prison, but remained restricted in his movements and stuck in the Komi area. Only his vacation could he spend in Lithuania, his homeland, as it were, thanks to that same forged document that prevented him from being released from the camps as a Polish citizen at the end of 1941 ...

Our fears that the effort would be more complicated were proven false. So as not to cast suspicion on himself, Nehemia brought the goods he had collected in Vorkuta to the base at Kozhva, made the proper arrangements for his vacation as per all the bureaucratic regulations, promised all his acquaintances presents from “the Continent”—the nickname for Russia among Komi folks—and the two set out westward together. They spent a few days in Moscow and continued on to Vilna.

The wind was blowing from a different quarter for Nehemia now, bearing him in the desired direction. The thing was just not to miss the opportunity. The evening that Bebka brought Nehemia to our apartment, we held a party at

the dormitory. Another victory over the regime! We'd saved one more comrade by the skin of his teeth! We were "screwing" the regime! In graphic Russian, we even had an abbreviation for our organization that was uncomplimentary to the authorities—if only they had known how to decode it.

And what if "they" were to "screw" us?

In the meantime, though, we toasted Nehemia's liberation: See you in Palestine!

It was the Land of Israel or the Land of the Polar Bears. There was no third option.

To wind up the commotion, I told Bebka that in my opinion he could begin to prepare now for his exit to Poland.

"When?"

"In about ten days ...

"But there is a problem ...," said Bebka

"What happened?"

"Yaka, maybe you have some kind of ID papers and the other necessary documents, just for these ten days you are talking about? I would not like to roam around without documents ... for ten days ..."

"Documents? For you? Why, have you been 'burned' and your personal papers invalidated?"

It was beyond my grasp why he would suddenly need papers not his own, when he already had valid papers.

Bebka scratched his forehead:

"I have no papers. They were stolen. Taken out of my pocket."

"When? Where?"

Bebka confessed that his papers and a sum of money in rubles had been stolen out of his pocket in Moscow, at the train station, when he was standing on line to buy a ticket to the far north ...

"In other words, you travelled to this cursed region in the far north, where they check everywhere, without papers? Are you crazy?"

I looked at him agitatedly, as if the danger had not passed, as though this minute he was about to be arrested ...

"Why did you travel up north without papers? How could you even think of such a thing?"

"How ... You ask how? What, after you chased after me to Moscow, after all the money wasted, you wanted me to come back here and tell you that my documents were stolen?"

I stared at him, dumbfounded; there he was right in front of me, safe and sound—and free! I gave him new documents and warned him that if he lost them, he should come right back to me and not run around without papers.

A few days later, he left for Lodz and crossed the border safely.



In the Soviet Union in those days there were no public opinion surveys, and when they are conducted there nowadays, they are designed to check how people feel only about day-to-day problems, not questions of principle such as the attitude to Lenin's writings or a clarification of what proportion of the people support or oppose the single-party rule of Communists.

How had the attitude of Jews—and I am talking about those Jews among whom I lived, i.e., Jews from the Baltic states—changed toward the Soviet regime since they had been taken under its wing?

I have no reliable criteria for addressing this question, and my conclusions are based only on feelings, not on in-depth study. I believe that, if a Zionist underground had arisen in Soviet Lithuania before the 1941-1945 war, it would soon have failed, even with a mission solely educational rather than operational, since the Jews were the first to inform on the activists and turn them in—and not necessarily for illicit gain. The goodwill that the Soviet regime had accumulated among many Jews in those days was considerable.

In post-war Vilna, our *bricha* underground kept going for about ten months—and neither external informers nor internal betrayal caused its downfall. Dozens of local Jews who were outside our active underground framework knew of our existence and what we were doing; the faces of Mulka and his comrades—given the provincial nature and small size of Jewish Vilna—could not have aroused the slightest suspicion that they were engaged in currency speculation or profiteering (Jews having a naturally sharp eye!). They knew very well what we were doing all along. When we failed, it was not due to informers.

The Lvov affair was well known. The scoundrel sang because they pushed him up against the wall—who knows how, exactly? Not that I'm the attorney for the defense, but neither do I think that, had he not been caught, he would have gone and informed on his own initiative.

It was after the war, actually, that the Soviet regime's credit among the Jewish public dried up—after the Nazis had been defeated. Of the earlier enthusiasm, nothing remained, not even among Jews who belonged to the Communist Party.

The number of Jews who volunteered to inform—or, less harshly put, to “co-operate with the security services”—decreased drastically. Jews had learned at their own cost something of the nature of this regime and related enthusiastically (even if the enthusiasm was restrained) to the Zionist idea, the struggle for independence taking place in *Eretz Yisrael*, and to *aliya*.

I am unable to verify this conclusion with a reliable opinion survey.



Unexpectedly, Yashka Golman's older brother Rafael arrived at our quarters in Vilna. I knew Yashka's family and I knew that he had older brothers. Rafael, known as "Foljka" in Russian, was a *Betar* man. The Golman family was one of those divided by politics.

During the war, Foljka had been conscripted into the army and, like his brother Yashka, he had spent most of it at the front. There, he was drafted again—by the Communist Party. Drafted? Well, yes, because anyone they wanted to promote was a member of the Party, and Rafael Golman was unquestionably a good soldier and deserving of promotion.

How did they recruit for the Party in the Soviet army? Well, for example, the *politruk* [political officer] would appear and announce something like: "Comrade Fighters! Today we will fight the decisive battle with the enemy. The battle will be hard and we may be required to sacrifice our lives for the motherland. Comrade Stalin would wish that you go into battle as Party members, with a Party membership card in your pocket. If we are destined to sacrifice our lives for the motherland, let us die as Party members. Who says nay?"

Since none are opposed, and democratic norms are alive and well, the *politruk* would fill out forms for anyone who had not already joined the ranks of the Party, and Comrade Stalin would of course send them his paternal blessings—if there were only time—in this world, and if there was a delay and the German attack came early—the blessings would arrive later, along with glory everlasting.

There was also another way: The *politruk* could invite Comrade Golman to his office and speak to him persuasively, like father to son: "I have your file here; you are an outstanding fighter, and you have no disciplinary demerits in your file. I also saw that you have not skipped a single political study session and you know the correct answers ... So, we sat with the commandant and thought to ourselves, why not give him a fast wartime promotion and make him an officer? But we were surprised to note, in your file, that you were never even in the *Komsomol*. Why? Are there problems? You are helping your parents? There's no one to support them? In the 8th Regiment, stationed right alongside us, everyone, with a single voice, volunteered to join the Party. I, as the political officer, will sign a recommendation ... "

Go decline that one!

Captain Foljka Golman was at that time in charge of the movement of coal cars by rail from Poland to the Soviet Union. He had a few soldiers under his command, and the unit's mission was to ensure that shipments arrived intact at their destinations, to prevent sabotage by rebellious Poles or Lithuanians, and also to prevent ordinary theft by citizens coveting the black cargo.

Once, while he was in Riga—the coal shipments' destination—Captain Golman was summoned to the Party committee and informed that the committee required him to discover "the Zionist-bourgeois-imperialist center hiding be-

hind the British secret police (or the Americans, or both at once) and carrying out hostile acts by smuggling Soviet citizens of Jewish nationality over the borders of the state, to be used by the anti-Soviet imperialist forces that have dared to subvert the foundations ...”

“Yes, comrades,” said Foljka, and departed for Vilna where he reported to our house.

“I have come to turn you over to the authorities,” he said, smiling.

Another bit of evidence that they are looking for us.

When we heard what Foljka was doing in his army job, we asked him to postpone turning us in, because we needed him: When next in Poland, would he please go to Lodz and bring us money from there.

Foljka brought us the money, in a gramophone whose innards had been removed, and told us that he had a problem: On his return journey, two soldiers from the cargo’s guard detail had disappeared. They may have been killed by Poles, or they may have been after Polish women and decided that being with the women was better than staying with the coal cars—who knew where they were now? The desertion worried him: there would be an inquiry, things would get messy, and they would discover that Captain Golman’s discipline was faulty ... What did we suggest that he do?

“Take off your uniform, put on civilian clothes and go to Palestine. They definitely need you there!”

Foljka Golman embarked for *Eretz Yisrael*.

Our activities continued for longer than was deemed reasonable for the existence of an underground in circumstances like those under the Soviets. The risk we faced kept growing. Unsurprisingly, Alexander and other comrades began pressuring us from Poland to wind things up and pack our bags.

We’d had enough of arrests in Lvov and in Riga. Enough! And we had accomplished most of our mission. Members of the various core groups from the pioneering youth movements who, as war came, had ended up in the Soviet Union and survived, had left for Poland; if not everyone—then most of them. Of course we could have gone on finding more candidates for *aliya*, but the work was becoming increasingly dangerous.

Instructions from Poland were clear: Get out of the Soviet Union!

Two reasons made us want to continue: First, how could we leave friends behind in prison and not keep trying to get them out? And second, we had only just discovered a gold mine of exit permits.

The gold mine was Lieutenant Colonel Ivan Karpovich Karpov, among the leaders of the Soviet partisan underground in Belorussia, and a candidate for a senior government post, named to represent the Soviet Union on the Regional Polish-Soviet Repatriation Committee in Baranovich.

When it appeared in Globokoya that our group—which included members of my own family—was about to be arrested following the fire that broke out in the farmer's granary, where my parents were housed—Lyubka Mindel produced a counterfeit card in the strange poker game he was playing with the local bureaucrats ... or rather, not completely counterfeit; two-sided.

Lyubka threatened the local repatriation clerk that if anyone in the group lost so much as one hair on their head, he would tell the security authorities “everything he knew.” What did he know? Only something very general and routine: For people wanting to get to Poland, everyone, or anyway a lot of people, were prepared to forge documents, look the other way, and so forth—for a bribe. The clerks, of course, did not know what Lyubka knew, or—more precisely—what Lyubka did not know.

Lyubka Mindel:

... The Polish representative was not kosher either, apparently. He began looking for me. Evidently he thought that I knew a lot about his transactions and that his sins were transparent and known to me. When I myself added that the NKVD was very interested in his doings, and given that he had no desire to sit in prison, he sent for me. I went and told him: “I know things.” He asked, simply, “Did that woman inform on me?” I seized on that and replied, “Of course, naturally! She did!” I had not the slightest idea of who she was, but I told him that I thought it was a very grave matter, though I would try to rescue him somehow. I could not help him at all, since I had no idea what it was about, and given that I myself was as treif as a pig! “Look,” I added, “I’ll help you. But in future I want you to give me documents for people who want to cross the border.” He said that now they were watching his every move, but he would give me a note for Baranovich because there one could continue to “produce papers.” And he gave me a note—for Karpov, Lieutenant Colonel Karpov ...

Globokoya was “burned” from our standpoint.

Lesik took the note and went to Baranovich. We advised him to take care there, and to take his time showing his cards, and to have pity on the funds and similar bits of advice, which he did not need.

In Baranovich, Lesik used the “shock treatment” method. After Karpov read the note he had with him, and they had eaten and even had a drink—the guest had produced a bottle of good wine from his pack—and after each had told the other about their adventures at the front, and so on and so forth, Lesik came to the point. He had a large family there, and he had to get them to Poland. They

had had some bureaucratic problems at their place of residence, and they were stuck and could not return to Poland. Lesik's request to Karpov was to help them.

Unquestionably, Karpov—properly bribed—was providing similar services to others. By nature he was kind, easygoing and friendly, and he had a large family; apparently, he had seen so much corruption all around him that finally he had decided that there was no point in not benefiting, himself. Lesik was not plowing virgin territory here: although Karpov would learn later that our activities were much more extensive than he at first imagined, we were not his first clients.

Lesik was in no hurry. He said that he needed to go somewhere in the area, and left Karpov with the information about the people, adding, "I am leaving money here." He put down his bag, said goodbye and left for the day.

The amount he left there was in the "shock treatment" range, and thereafter Karpov became our main supplier. The *modus operandi* that had evolved over time was simple: Based on the composition of the group we wanted to move to Poland, we would create reasonable "families"—a young couple here, parents and children and a grandmother there—and give Karpov a list of these "families" with first names, father's name, family name, the relationships among the members, and their ages, and would derive a sum by multiplying the price per person by the number of "family members." Karpov would send back to our representatives the required papers, duly signed; and thus equipped, everyone in a given "package" could leave immediately on an ordinary train for the border city of Brest, pass the check of their documents and baggage, and continue on to Poland. The head of each group, chosen by us, knew what he had to do in Poland, how to find the right address in Lodz, the person there who should be shown the note provided by Mulka or me and to whom the latest information we had supplied about our situation should be passed on; the group's head would then integrate—as per the instructions from the headquarters of the movements to which the members of his group belonged—into the general flow of those leaving the Communist bloc, or else, depending on the assessment of the situation by local activists, remain where he was to do culture and values related educational work with the young people in need of it, or to engage in political action.

We agreed, as a basic rule, that no one person should be on the "Karpov track" for too long a time. Too many people—including army officers and Soviet security agents—roamed around his territory or were even guests in his home. After Lesik ("Anton", to Karpov) had made several visits to the lieutenant colonel's home, he was replaced by Lyuba Mindel; the third was Avraham Polda, a Holocaust survivor and former yeshiva student; the fourth—the quiet, modest Meir Shumkar; the fifth—Chaim Sher; and there were others after that. Before finishing his tour of duty, our representative to Poland would advise Karpov to expect, next time, his friend / brother / good pal / army buddy, whose name was Misha / Sasha / Grisha / Boria; and the new rep would come to Karpov's house bringing

his predecessor's greetings and then hand over the list. Generally, the "package" was already in place at the train station in Baranovich and our rep would soon be handing them their signed transit permits.

Karpov made a fortune, but the price per person was low.

■ ■ ■

Like many others during that winter of 1939-40, Chaim Sher was caught up in the stream of refugees to Vilna, from where he hoped make his way to Palestine sooner or later. The Soviet-German war put an end to that plan. Despite having been born in Poland, he found himself in the Lithuanian Division and came out of that long, hard war as a first lieutenant in the Soviet army. For many years thereafter, he was known as "Chaim Lieutenant."

I confess that, although in the past I was a member of a Zionist youth movement, worked at a kibbutz training camp, was named to the central committee of "Young Pioneer," (Hechalutz Hatzair), still I did not believe that getting out of the Soviet Union was possible. I built my future in that country ... One of the young women working with the bricha in Vilna visited me at my army base and hinted to me that someone was organizing things for people who wanted to leave the Soviet Union and go to Palestine. No, I did not believe that such a thing could happen, but she promised to arrange a meeting for me with the relevant people. I don't know why I believed her and I don't know why you, Yacov, trusted a Red Army officer and came to meet with him. You were my first connection to the bricha.

Why did we trust him? It is not so surprising. He was recommended by a fellow Lodz native, Alexander.

Chaim Sher:

The first conversation was just to get acquainted. Yaka asked me who I was, what I was, and about my past. At first he was cautious with me—I understood the intent of this—but after a few meetings, I earned their trust. They took me to their house, and there I first met Pavel, that is, Mulka ...

After a few conversations with Chaim, we suggested that he get out of the army and settle in Lvov, so that he could take care of our prisoners there. Our intention was to leave him in the Soviet Union after we left Vilna. His "actual" Polish

origins insured that the time would come when he could follow us. Chaim in fact went to Lvov, to prepare the ground.

It was clear to us all that we should submit an appeal to the courts on the verdicts reached in Lvov, otherwise the defendants would be moved to forced labor camps and the situation become more complicated.

Meanwhile we heard that possibly we could spring a few of our people from the prison in Lvov. There was a flour mill station in the vicinity that provided flour to the municipal prison and its environs. There, the guard was very light. We were told that we could make contact with the manager at the mill, who, for a hundred thousand rubles, would send for our prisoners to work at his plant. In that case, we would have to find a vehicle—meaning, a taxi—to take them from the mill and ferry them to Poland.

No one remembers who it was exactly who suggested this program to us, but it was rejected. Political prisoners would not have been sent out to work without a heavy guard detail.

We had already learned something of prisons and prisoners.

Lvov became, for us, a silent desert. Our connection was entirely severed, including that with the head of the community. Our attempts to function there had led to disaster. We passed some packages to the prisoners—call them care packages—but were unable to verify that they had reached their destination.

After our efforts in Lvov proved so disappointing, and before we left the land of the Soviets forever, turning over all our troubles there to Chaim Sher, I decided to try my luck in Moscow. I thought to talk with Ilya Brauda, the attorney who had succeeded in moderating the sentences given to the Vilna prisoners. We had nothing better to try.

I did not expect much. But easing the sentences for Kopel and his friends, insofar as possible, and providing them with some material assistance, would have seemed like an achievement.

The prospects for Ilka Zaiden and his comrades—whose trial had yet to take place—were better. Ilka had a sister, Dora, and we could act on her behalf and in her name. Precious time must not be wasted.

To Moscow!

When I telephoned Betty, the day after my arrival in the capital, I was told that she had moved and was given a new phone number. This time I found her. We agreed to meet downtown near the well-known Red Poppy Café. My gloomy prophecies, often not borne out, this time came true. She had sold her house in Dvinsk, but the sales agent who had promised her in exchange a room in Moscow had disappeared with her money. Undiscouraged, she took comfort in her studies. I tried in vain to persuade her to go to Palestine, as her friends from Tashkent, now in Poland, had decided to do. She was determined to finish her studies and I was unable to tempt her, not even with the reputation of the Hebrew University

on Mt. Scopus. I shrugged and let it go. It was not our custom to “push” people into the adventure of flight from the Soviet Union.

Betty suggested that rather than sitting at the expensive café, we sit and talk at the flat of a friend of hers. I bought some refreshments so as not to impose on the hostess—Moscow was still hungry—and we went there.

From the moment we met, I felt that we were old friends. Who knows what a woman’s secret magic is?

In the later afternoon, her daughter came home from her summer day camp with a handful of pebbles she had collected on the riverbank, smiled at me, and suggested that we play that favorite children’s game, Five Stones. The child’s delicate features, so like her mother’s, and her prominent jaw line were unmistakably Russian-looking, but her dark brown eyes, always so sad—even when I was able to make her laugh—were from her father. Jewish eyes. What a combination ...

This girl’s father had been arrested in 1937, at the height of the dictator’s excesses. A writer and journalist—were any further testimony needed as to his treason, his intrigues against the regime?

The girl was born a few days after the Troika—the secret committee of the security services, with three members, empowered by Soviet law, “the most democratic in the whole world,” to judge anyone in absentia—sentenced him to ten years’ imprisonment at hard labor; the mother and infant were evicted from their home. In her bitterness, after every friend and acquaintance had shut their doors to her, she went to the gloomy building where the Troika convened and stood in front of the door there, her infant in her arms, all night.

... The man who came out of that gloomy building very early in the morning was tired, and his reddened, watery eyes suggested that he had “worked” hard. I approached and told him my name and my husband’s name. “I am being evicted from my house,” I said, “where am I to go with my infant?” The man looked at me for a long time. I saw that he was near collapsing—having “worked” through the night and finished organizing people’s sentences ... then he lowered his eyes and said: “Go home—no one will bother you ... ”

And no one did ... Who says there is no mercy under Soviet law?

In the clear early light of morning, with the sunrise, a dangerous filament of mercy can pierce the heart of one who issues sentences and determines people’s fate, from five years of hard labor to summary execution.

That is why they work at night.

At night—lest they see the eyes of a woman or a girl who has managed to get through to where they are.

Did this issuer of sentences recall the file of the woman standing before him, her infant in her arms—noting her father’s suicide, her mother’s term of twenty-five years, her stepfather’s death sentence?

In any event, he knew nothing about her husband’s parents being tortured to death in the dungeons of Lubyanka, since that affair had yet to be recorded in her file.

Perhaps—seeing her there in the clear morning light—he simply felt sorry for her, this “decider of fates”?

Seeing her there ... perhaps ...

That’s why they are employed at night.

With the circle of ostracism closing in on her, how does a woman support herself now, when the chief of cadres—the functional director—of any institution would never employ her?

When a rebel is banished from the kingdom, how does the family left behind earn a living, when all means of livelihood are in the hands of the monarchy? How?

A writer or a poet—from translations, because if they appear in print—anonymously, of course—he is paid his pittance; an engineer—by doing minor electrical repairs in private homes; a teacher—from private tutoring ...

They learn new trades and adjust to reality. Some turn to begging.

Betty’s ostracized friend did illustrations of their designs for a cooperative that made head scarves and sweaters.

She had nimble fingers, and she was lucky.

■ ■ ■

En route to Moscow, I considered how best to get to Brauda, the attorney. Undoubtedly, he would be working in one of the Moscow “consultations”—the official law bureaus.

Clearly, in such a public place, every corner would be teeming with the clients of the attorneys, the various advisers, secretaries and experts, and there were bound to be informers, whether paid or volunteer. It wasn’t only that I needed a private chat with him, like any client and attorney; I also needed to avoid, insofar as possible, a visit to anywhere where the authorities were likely to take official note of my presence and my attempt to organize a defense for political prisoners. If I had a letter of recommendation from Katz, the man who had brought Brauda to Vilna to defend the prisoners from the convoy, that would make getting in touch with him easier, but Katz had already gone to Poland and had not left me anything..

But actually ... actually, I didn’t need his letter! Why shouldn’t I just write the

letter that Katz promised me? Katz did not strike me as the sort of Jew who writes letters in Russian, and it was a reasonable assumption that Brauda had never seen his handwriting. I would write it myself.

I telephoned his house and introduced myself using a pseudonym. I said I was from Vilna and was bringing him greetings. I was given an appointment for the day after tomorrow.

Brauda, among the foremost attorneys in the Soviet Union, while living in central Moscow, did not even have a waiting-room in his flat, as attorneys customarily did. His wife, somewhat feeble, opened the door of the apartment and asked that I wait outside until the preceding client left. When the client left, I went into a small room full of cabinets stuffed with files and books, where it would have been difficult to place a third chair. I removed from my pocket “Katz’s letter of recommendation,” and Brauda perused it, nodding delightedly. The letter praised its bearer and recommended him as an honest and fair person, whom he, Brauda, might be able to help “as you helped me, and you can rely on him. He deserves your help. Yours, Katz.”

The agile, short-statured man with the alert gaze reviewed the note and repeated something from Katz’s praise, that he was his friend, yes—his friend, and indeed, the letter he had written was very agreeable ...

I came to the point. I told him everything I knew about Kopel and company’s case, which had been tried in secret (I did not know then that, formally, the trial was open to the public although it had taken place within the walls of the prison in Lvov). I added, to Brauda, that insofar as I knew, the only crime committed by Kopel and his friends was of the sort that the court in Vilna had addressed when he, Brauda, was attorney for the defendants there ...

Brauda appeared to be thinking. He told me that, in the Soviet Union, there were only four attorneys entitled to see secret files of people tried in secret; he was one of them. I replied that this was the reason I had come to him. He added that getting such a file to read was very difficult, although possible, and that perhaps to this end he would have to make a special trip to Lvov—a hint that the expenses entailed might be high. I told him that I was prepared to bear all expenses; he need not be concerned about the matter of his fee.

Brauda expressed his doubts as to whether I could afford the fee. Because I knew that Katz, to pay for the Vilna defense, had given Brauda two hundred thousand rubles, I held my breath and asked him to name an amount.

He thought it over and said, “A hundred thousand.”

I was not surprised, although it was an enormous amount for any private individual.

I knew that the “shock treatment” approach was a proven one. I stuck my hand in the back pocket of my trousers—the way one retrieves a bus ticket or a movie ticket—and looking him in the eye, said, “Right away ...”

The man paled. Then he held his arm up in a defensive gesture and requested, “Not now.” The sum he had named was not, of course, at my disposal then and there. I had perhaps ten thousand with me, perhaps twenty, but the impression had been crushing.

Brauda was silent for a little while, then came nearer and whispered, “And who can guarantee that you are not an agent of the security services?”

I was not expecting that question. I said, greatly embarrassed: “Really, how could I prove to you that I’m not their agent? Surely you do not expect me to bring you a document from their office stating that I am not employed there ... ”

He realized that I was right, but tried again: “Perhaps there is someone here, in Moscow, who can vouch for you? In the synagogue, perhaps?”

I was astonished. “Understand me: I am not interested in becoming acquainted with people here. What I do is not something one discusses much. I keep my distance from the synagogue. I need not tell you that the synagogue is crawling with agents and informers ... ”

Silence.

I cut short his musings: “There is no third way here. Either you trust me and we continue this conversation, or not. I will not be angry—I will just leave, asking only that you kindly forget I was here.” And I immediately added, “But on the other hand, how might you advise me to prove to you that I am not a provocateur, but an honest man?” He again thought it over, and said, “I believe you ... ”

And suddenly he was an entirely different person. Brauda was impressed when I related how the Vilna prisoners had behaved, with what determination; he inquired about the struggle in Palestine; he asked whether I speak Hebrew; he opened a drawer of old files, took them out, and showed me photographs from 1937, when he had participated in the trials of the leading “Trotskyites”; trials of foreign citizens accused of anti-Soviet spying; photos from the Times and various other foreign newspapers where his name was mentioned ...

It was as though I had removed a cork blocking his throat.

I mentioned that there was another matter to discuss—and told him of the Riga affair, the matter of Ilka Zaiden and his comrades.

“Riga? A trial will be opening there soon at which I must appear. That will make things simpler.”

We agreed on fifty thousand for handling the case of the Riga defendants.

He then added a detail I had not thought of: “Someone—preferably a family member of one of those accused in each case—must pay here, in Moscow, at the National Lawyer’s Bureau, in the *konsultatsia* of which I am a member, the official sum for my services at the trials. That is about seven thousand rubles. That provides me with official authorization to defend these accused, in the name of an interested family member.”

I would need money. Meantime, fifty thousand would do.

From Brauda, I went straight to the telegraph office and sent a telegram to Vilna: "I passed the entrance exams. Send the fifth volume of the encyclopedia." Mulka would understand: If a book meant a thousand rubles, an encyclopedia would be "worth" ten thousand ...

Mulka brought the money himself. He navigated Moscow like a fish in water. He had two aunts and many friends there, from his student days at the engineering institute. Among these friends, he could be Mulka Yaffe who had come to Moscow after an absence of a year; he was living and working in Riga ...

Mulka also met with the illustrator; the three of us even enjoyed a concert together.

He was in the mood to "sell off the merchandise"—meaning that we would leave Chaim Sher there and make our exit; that we shouldn't gild the lily. I sensed that he was starting to make plans for the future—about moving illegal immigrants through the Italian ports. After our experience with the Soviets, how could the British deter us?

We agreed that he would send Chaim Sher to me in Moscow after I sent him word, and that I would present Chaim to Brauda, to ensure continuity in handling what I had set in motion there.

Mulka went back to Vilna and I deposited the money with Brauda.

Who would make the payment at the attorneys' bureau, to retain Brauda's services?

Dora, Ilka's sister, could not go to Moscow; her mother was in a coma and Dora would not leave her bedside. So I went myself to the law offices and deposited the required sum, to retain Brauda's services in the "Kopel Skop case." No one asked me for an identity card or any other papers. They asked only my name, and I made one up on the spot. Would I go there again to pay for Ilka? No. There was only one cashier on duty, and she would undoubtedly remember the bespectacled man who paid for someone else's legal counsel. It might well arouse suspicion.

Where would help come from? Should I ask Betty? Levy said we must not complicate things for her; she had a Zionist past.

My time was my own. I had nothing to do in the city apart from my contact with Brauda. Betty's friend the illustrator and I went on a lot of walks; we went to the Bolshoi Ballet, to concerts, to exhibitions. We also talked a lot, giving me a sense of the double life, almost like an underground existence—like Marranos—lived by the intelligentsia in this country.

Somewhere along the line I told her about the problem of making the payment to the attorneys' bureau. I asked whether she was willing to go and make the payment for Brauda's fee for handling the case of Ilka Zaiden.

She agreed to go. I told her that she should not give her real name. She must use a pseudonym; they don't ask for an ID. I proposed a first name, last name, and

father's name that worked equally well for Jews and for non-Jews, since her face was so Russian-looking. Why arouse suspicion?

She did as I asked.

One sunny day, as we were strolling along Kirov Street. I had a sudden attack of fear—not concern: fear.

I had put her in jeopardy. Her family had a political past. She did not need something like this! What was I thinking? Why had I involved her in something so absolutely to be avoided? What insanity ... Must we recruit everyone to the transport of Jews to Palestine? I could have asked one of the young women in Vilna, for example, to come to Moscow and deposit the money.

Now I had to hide my fear from her. Better not to worry her now, after the fact. And she would need a good reason for having given a false name, an answer to any questions about why she volunteered or who sent her, in case she is asked ... “... You are thinking about something ... did something happen?”

I didn't see the point in hiding my concern. I had created this problem for her, and she ought to know ...

Should I suggest that she leave with us? What she said was somehow suggestive ... I am making this even more complicated ... in that little cell in Riga, with the father ...

She sensed that I was caught by some worrying thought.

“Are you worried about my visit to the *konsultatzia*? The pseudonym I used?”

It was worrying her, too. And why not? She had experience with this sort of thing. How much worse could I have made it?

Lacking a good answer to the question, gripped by panic, my reply was brusque.

“Why didn't you refuse me? What if they harass you? Or arrest you?”

Silence.

Why did I say something so dumb?

The sun blazed down on Kirov Street. Midday in August. We walked along in silence.

“I know that if I am arrested, you will take care of the little girl. Or your friends will. I'm sure of that.”

Things with Brauda went well, so I decided to send for Chaim to come to Moscow. It was time to introduce him to Brauda and to pay another sum of money. Brauda was not comfortable with my intention to leave the area. Why involve someone else in this less-than-kosher matter?

When Chaim arrived with another fifty thousand rubles in his wallet, we went to see Brauda. And he, an attorney of stature thanks to his brilliant mind—or such was my impression—asked us this time if we were agents of British Intelligence!

Even he could not escape the brainwashing—but to such an extent? For many years, Stalin viewed the treacherous British as the devil incarnate, and the notion had penetrated even intellectual circles. Was Brauda, too, one of its victims? To suspect that young Zionists, working to dispatch Jews to *Eretz Yisrael*, are tools of British Intelligence, of all things? How long must the Soviet apparatchiks have “worked on” him, to persuade him of something like that? No wonder they had him appear in those orchestrated “open” trials—the young man played his role for them and for the naïve observers outside the wall they had constructed ...

I reassured him, and this time, too, he was persuaded of our sincerity.

Chaim had to return to Vilna. It fell to me to try to organize a “transfer” deal in Moscow, so as to cover the burgeoning expenses. The secret of this “transfer” was shared by only two people—Mulka and me. The man with the money was in Moscow.

I went with Chaim to the Belorussky train station, where the westbound trains depart. I knew a fellow there who, in exchange for a “modest gift,” could arrange a reserved-seat ticket for Chaim. He had a long journey ahead of him.

At the station, I gave Chaim a note with a written version of the financial transfer that I had given instructions for, in case I had to get out of the city and leave him to follow up.

When the long train stopped at the platform and the two of us went to the carriage where his seat was, a man in the uniform of the railroad authority walking in the other direction stopped Chaim and asked for his documents. I thought to keep going, but the man preempted me: “Yours, too,” he said. When we presented our documents, he took them and asked that we go with him.

Run? We had no chance. The area was fenced in. Railroad employees were everywhere. The railroad station was among the noisier places in the city, but it was also very heavily guarded. I had no doubt whatsoever that the agent who had stopped us was part of a larger detail and that the others were following along behind us. Having no other option, we behaved as though a mistake had been made here and there was no reason to get excited: just a routine check.

All my documents were authentic, and in my own name. And Chaim’s, likewise.

The man who had taken our documents walked about ten or fifteen paces ahead of us, without bothering to turn around and so much as glance at us. He was sure that we would not escape him. The two of us followed along, talking with one another. As we passed close to a trash can, I was able to get rid of my notebook, which had things written in it that could complicate matters for us. Chaim, too, jettisoned some notes.

Was this the end? How would we notify Vilna?

And what of the illustrator? And her daughter? The authorities would start to investigate ...

We went into the office. The man sat me down on a sofa and took Chaim into his office. To flee was impossible. A guard sat next to the door. I remembered that in my wallet there was a receipt for a telegram I had sent to Vilna. If they found it, they would discover our address. Should I throw it into the trash? Heaven forbid. It would be found. The receipt was not large—a small slip with information and the postal stamp on it. I tried swallowing the paper. What a bland taste ... I felt nauseated. I thought I might vomit. Such a small bit of paper, yet it refused to disappear into my stomach?

Success. Now if I could just avoid vomiting.

When the agent took Chaim into his room, he told him immediately, “Give me the note!” Clearly he meant the “transfer” note, which he had seen me give to him. But Chaim had managed to dispose of that note in a trash bin between the train platform and the building we were brought to; he had also managed to empty his pockets of various other items, including photos of Kopel and some of his friends.

Chaim claimed that the note was the address of a friend I had written down for him, but that because he knew the address anyway, he had just dropped the note on the platform.

When it was my turn to be questioned, Chaim said to me in Yiddish, “I threw away the note you gave me with the address, right?” At this point a brief argument ensued in Russian over the note, and I “had no idea” what they wanted from me. Now Chaim was removed from the room and the agent, holding my documents in his hands, began questioning me.

What was I doing in Moscow?

“What does a student at the conservatory do in the summertime? He travels to the capital, goes to concerts, to the Lenin Library, to the theater. Enjoys life a little ... ”

And suddenly the questioning ended. The two of us—Chaim and me—were quickly escorted by two people back to the train alongside which we were stopped, and they returned our documents and instructed us to get going. I was able to shout in Hebrew to Chaim, who had already boarded the train, that he should be careful because they would be watching him—and I made myself scarce, trying to disappear into the crowd. I went down to the subway, and I changed trains a few times until persuaded that no one was tailing me.

If only Chaim managed to get away from them!

One more escape.

■ ■ ■

A few of our activists had been taken by authorities in the past and then either fled or managed to be released on some excuse; they had been on the point of ar-

rest but the danger passed. We lived with the feeling that good luck smiled on us, but also that the authorities did not know how to deal with the “issue” we represented. The disaster in Lvov was basically a result of the treachery of an emissary; fortunately for us, the *strashina* did not have detailed information about us, so Vilna was spared being “burned.” Likewise the arrests in Riga, as we understood them, were made possible by an informant, not by detection undertaken at the initiative of the authorities.

From an intellectual standpoint, I dare say, “they” had still not grappled with the problem of our center in Vilna. On the other hand, we could not ignore the fact that somewhere, at some level, information had to be accumulating about “subversive activities” back and forth across the Soviet-Polish border. Someone had to be sitting somewhere, linking one fact to the next, noticing that individuals and even entire families—in Riga, Kovno, Dvinsk, Shavli and elsewhere—kept disappearing as though the ground had split open and swallowed them, yet after a time their letters began arriving from Poland or Western Europe ... And equally certain was that, here and there, someone was reporting to the authorities about some case or other of *bricha*—flight—and with respect to those instances, clearly the investigation and trial in Lvov had revealed that the Zionist network also reached into the western Soviet Union, and who knew how its deployment was proceeding or *whom it served* ...

And there was more:

... In Riga, some Jewish youths had been arrested and they may have been connected, possibly unawares, with the Zionist network.

... In Vilna, Riga, and other Jewish areas, Jews whispered among themselves about what was termed in Yiddish “*de organizatsia*” [the organization], headquartered in Vilna: it was said that if you knew those people, you were assured that they would bring you to Palestine, and it wouldn’t even cost you money.

... In Brest there was an incident during the summer involving a soldier in uniform, who crossed the border with \$2,000 hidden in his suitcase. After intensive interrogation, which yielded nothing, the man disappeared.

... Reports from Lvov, based on confessions by the *strashina*, who had “crossed over,” had certainly noted the existence of a Zionist center in Vilna and another planned for Lvov, and made clear that representatives from Vilna had taken an interest in Lvov and the fate of the prisoners there.

In truth, the Soviet security services had more pressing problems at the time, especially in the Baltic states and western Ukraine, where violent anti-Soviet activity was being conducted by members of local nationalist movements. But desecrating the sanctity of the hermetically sealed border was extremely serious, and the Soviet agencies were obliged to state their opinion, forcefully and without delay.

The fact is that, in Poland, the authorities treated the *bricha* movement with

kid gloves, sometimes even ignoring it, given their “understanding” of the Polish soul: the Poles wished to be rid of excess Jews, if only from considerations of Moscow’s anti-British policy, which sought to make problems for the British mandate government in *Eretz Yisrael*. But to set up an underground within the Soviet Union? Never!

Only a blind man could fail to see that the investigation was closing in and would soon have us encircled; never mind that the comrades in Lodz were right when they repeatedly urged us to get out of there. But this was an insight after the fact—and furthermore, in those days there were still, within the territory of the Soviet Union, another few dozen people whom we could not and would not abandon ...

Get out and leave our comrades in trouble? Not an option.

I checked several times and was persuaded that I had shed any possible tails. Only then did I return to the illustrator’s apartment. I knew that she had to go to Riga, be with her little daughter, and I told her that I would join her.

She was very happy. Living for the moment ...

To get to Vilna—and get away to Poland! I decided not to go by the direct train from Moscow to Vilna. Most likely they would be looking for me there. I would therefore go by the train to Riga, and somewhere along the way I would find one bound for Vilna.

I did not try to keep from her the fact that they were following me. But I said that the detectives had let go, for now. I was sure of it. I also decided that it was time we coordinated our stories, in case I was imprisoned and she, too, was called for questioning.

“If they ever ask you (I explained) where we met, insist that it was a chance meeting at the Red Poppy Café, and that it was I who, a few days later, asked you to go to the law offices and deposit a payment to Brauda for handling the Eliyahu Zaiden case. If they ask you: ‘What? Just like that, you did whatever some passerby, some casual acquaintance, asked you to do?’—you should answer: ‘So what? It was a banal case of a temporary connection, like countless others that happen after a war. A pleasant fellow makes a good impression on me, and I’m a woman alone. Who’s to stop me?’ Of course, you know that I’m a student from Riga who came to visit Moscow. I was there—and then disappeared. Just another tale of love at first sight.”

We went to the train. The little girl remained with Betty.

We were tense, but everything went fine. The closer we got to the station from which I planned to switch to the other train, the more tension there was. We tried to keep it inside. To our travelling companions—on long journeys, a railroad carriage becomes like a neighborhood clubhouse, with a lot of candid conversations—we were just another couple going on holiday to the Baltic seashore. Were

there detectives trailing us? We thought not. In any event, we were unable to discover any.

We had been an entire day en route, trying not to think about the approaching station, from where she would go on without me.

Rezekne. A Latvian village. A farewell on the platform. The film industry would certainly insist on this moving scene. A woman's lips trembling, a handkerchief waving in the wind, the engine belching thick smoke, its whistle piercing the silence, her wide-open eyes reflecting her world crashing around her ... or around both of them.

Chaim Sher felt the detectives—two of them—were travelling along with him.

The entire way, I felt their presence. At the Minsk station, I got off the train to get a drink of water—with them following. We finally got to Vilna—and I know Vilna better than they do—and there I was able to shake them. I did not go home, because when I was arrested in Moscow, I gave them my address. I went to our safe house, but even that I did cautiously. I arrived in the city in the afternoon, at four o'clock. I waited until ten o'clock to go into the apartment. I was sure that I had shaken the detectives. Mulka was home and I told him about it. I stayed there a few days, until it was decided that I should go out and see what was happening outside. I went to my house and saw that a few detectives had it surrounded. I must say that they were very professional. I went back to Mulka. I was very tense. I decided to use alcohol to get a grip on myself, but it only made me more confused. About two days later, Lyubka Mindel came to see me, with a note saying that the house was still being watched; it was decided that I should leave and find work. I went to the employment office. After that I got a note saying that everyone was getting out of there; they were leaving me a large sum of money, in case I could do anything for the prisoners. Two hundred thousand rubles. They promised to stay in touch with me.

Chaim Sher was still under surveillance.

From Rezekne train station, I got to Dvinsk, where I had to get on the train from Leningrad bound for Vilna and beyond. They were not selling tickets at the ticket window. I obtained a ticket only after paying a "bribe tax." I was already used to the corruption. I viewed it as a tax that had to be paid, to enable the clerks who shared it to make a living. Despite this opportunistic reasoning, I was nauseated just counting the necessary bills.

The grief and worry gave me no rest, and it was worse the nearer I got to Vilna.

Had I met her only to part from her? Ought I to try to pretend to myself that I am indifferent—that I feel “So what? Am I the first, or the last, to meet and then part? And she—is she the one and only?”

And at the same time: Had we escaped them, or not? Would our luck betray us this time or would our resourcefulness serve us again if we could just stay calm? How could we avoid stumbling, avoid mistakes?

An analysis of the situation was called for. Rhetorical questions would not help clarify the picture; they only point to self-pity, to waning alertness, loss of the tension required.

Was I slipping into a kind of hackneyed foolishness?

There were many signs clearly suggesting that the authorities were casting a wide net and tightening the perimeter in order to capture us. In Moscow they proved that they were alert and at the ready; in Vilna, some of our activists were never left in peace; in Riga, they were undoubtedly watching the families of the prisoners; Lvov had been in the crosshairs for some time already. One could assume that an operational headquarters had been set up to orchestrate the siege, a headquarters run from Moscow ...

Were these conscious tactical analyses—by Mulka and me—in the days preceding arrest? Or was it all a case of hindsight? Many years have passed since then. Today, I find that question hard to answer. Awash with the sense that the trap was closing, we somehow still felt sure that this time, once again, we’d get out of it somehow, that we had the upper hand.

On my return from Moscow, I found Mulka ready for a confrontation.

I arrived in Vilna at midday on a Friday. The atmosphere in our basement apartment was tense. A few of the activists, and even their wives, felt that they were being followed. The feeling was that Vilna was liable to be a trap for the activists still there.

I went to the post office to see whether there were any telegrams or letters from leaders of “packages,” confirming arrival at the Lodz *ma'on*. I went back to our place and felt no one following me. Everything seemed benign.

Lyubka Mindel had a permanent tail. He had managed to outwit the detectives and spirit his wife and their little daughter out of the house, but clearly they needed to get out of the city as quickly as possible. With Lyubka, a young woman named Sheindel was supposed to leave, along with her brother Eli and another young man whose name no one remembered. Also leaving was a girl, a Holocaust survivor, who evidently had been given to Christians when the Germans invaded, and her parents had now been found—we did not even know if they were in Poland or in Israel—and we had been asked by the Lodz center to do our best to bring her there. The girl, who had been through her own tough times

during the Holocaust and then at a Soviet orphanage, was very scared and did not want to go anywhere. The women in our group, especially Sarah—who had had similar experiences herself—were able to moderate the child’s fears. We were very determined to deliver her to her parents.

Chaim Sher, who thought he had shaken the Moscow detectives tailing him, learned that their Vilna colleagues were also unwilling to let him be. On the spot, we cancelled the plan for him to serve in Lvov. We decided to evacuate him and his wife.

We were still determined to help the Lvov prisoners. Instead of Chaim, who had been “burned,” Nehemia and his friend Sarah would go. This decision was cruel and hard to justify. Both of them had experienced their own torments, each beyond any one person’s share—she in the Vilna ghetto and in concentration camps; he in the Soviet camps in the Arctic.

Under the original plan, Lyubka Mindel was supposed to take some of his group to Minsk, and some were supposed to leave Vilna the following day and travel to Baranovich. We did not want too many people travelling together on the same train. Those who had gone to Minsk would return the next day to Baranovich, meet the Vilna group when it arrived, and get from Sarah the documents she would be bringing from Karpov.

From Baranovich, they would all have to continue, under Lyubka’s leadership, to the border station at Brest and cross into Poland.

Given my arrest in Moscow, it was decided that I would also go to Baranovich and leave with all the others for Poland.

Another detail in our planning: Since Chaim Sher was known to the agents, we decided that he and his wife would leave for the train station separately. We did not want him to appear at all at the Vilna station, which was overrun with informers and detectives, so instead he was to go in a taxi with his wife to the station at Vileyka, outside Vilna, on the Vilna-Baranovich-Minsk line. Hence we needed a taxi driver who would come to the basement apartment, pick up Chaim and Tzila and bring them on time to Vileyka. Hiring a taxi in those days was itself a complicated task.

We wanted to ensure that, if something befell one group, or even one of its links, the others could still get away.

When struggling with Esau, you learn from Jacob’s experience.

The building we were in fronted Yakova Street, parallel to the river that bisects the city, which flows along only a few dozen meters from our basement windows, partly below the sidewalk level. On the other side, our apartment faced Yakshto Street, which led to the river.

Someone in the group pointed out to me that, a modest distance away on the river bank, there were people—at least two—looking in our windows. Chaim and

I checked and saw that this was indeed so. Evidently the detectives were stationed there not only to observe and record everyone who entered or left our apartment.

At that point, Mulka was not at home.

I may have brought the watchers to our house after my visit to the post office, or they may have followed me ever since my arrival from Moscow, but I found that hard to believe. There was no way to prevent them from identifying me in Vilna by my photograph, copied from my ID document when it was in their possession at the Belorussky train station in Moscow; and it was also possible that the Vilna detectives who followed Lyubka and Chaim had been instructed to identify the bespectacled fellow who met with the suspects they had under surveillance.

At that moment, however, we were too preoccupied to analyze the situation. We needed to find an answer to a more urgent question: If our house was under surveillance, how would Chaim get away to go to the Vileyka train station? It was clear that everyone in the house, and anyone else who might enter it, were endangered.

Mulka supplied the answer when he came, telling Chaim: “You don’t have to tell me ... I know that the house is surrounded. Get your suitcase. I’ve brought a taxi. It’s waiting on Yakshto Street.”

A considered opinion, spoken quietly and without panic.

I told Mulka that I suspected the surveillance was aimed at me. We instructed Chaim to wait for five or ten minutes. The two of us, Mulka and I, went out to Yakova Street and began walking alongside the river, distancing ourselves from the corner of Yakshto. We noted that the detectives were walking some distance behind us. We kept on going in this direction for about ten minutes, and then turned around and went back to our basement flat, winding up a short walk by two friends engaged in pleasant conversation on a wonderful autumn day along the river ...

But these were the minutes Chaim needed to reach the taxi on Yakshto Street unimpeded—and get out of the danger zone.

About seventeen years later, Chaim confesses to me:

If I’d had to do it alone, I wouldn’t have left. Only Mulka’s cool composure—and what composure!—helped me. I went out, sat in the taxi and drove to get my wife, waiting for me on another street.

We can assume that the detectives executed their orders literally: Follow the balding fellow with the spectacles and pay no special attention to the others.

Chaim left. We stayed inside ...

There were now three of us there: Mulka, Ella the landlady, and me. Nehemia, Sarah and the others were somewhere else in the city.

We knew that anyone in the house was liable to be jailed. We also understood that if Nehemia and Sarah were not incarcerated that night, they needed to be gotten out immediately to Poland. How to help Kopel and the others would demand due consultation at a later stage ...

Ella also knew that nothing good would come of her remaining in that place. It was her apartment, and she would be unable to rid herself of responsibility for what had taken place there, but she had to wait for the return of her husband Shimon, an army officer serving in Riga who was due to wind up his service in another few days. The two had not been planning to leave the Soviet Union, but given what had happened, she understood that they would have to, or suffer the consequences.

We prepared ourselves for a search; perhaps, for prison. We “sterilized” the house and our pockets, destroying superfluous documents and notes.

Nehemia came to see us that evening. It was decided that, the next day, he would go to Lvov and wind things up there; with him on that same train would go Sarah, and also Sheindel, Eli and his friend, and the girl being returned to her parents. We gave Sarah the additional task of going to see Karpov, getting the evaculist from him for all those crossing to Poland, and then handing them off to the head of the group, Lyubka Mindel, who would await her, as noted, at the Baranovich station after arriving there with his people from Minsk.

If this plan came off as we hoped, only three of our members would remain in the Soviet Union—Mulka, Nehemia and Sarah. Ella, who was waiting for her husband Shimon to get out of the army, was to cross the border with him later on—with documents they would get from Karpov.

Nehemia was charged with taking care of the train tickets for the next morning. Obtaining those would also involve a lot of trouble.

Everyone was to make their own way to the train station; Sarah would bring the little girl.

Since there were detectives stationed outside the house, Nehemia had to leave in some “reasonable” way and shed the surveillance. Ella and Nehemia opened the front door wide and by the electric light in the hallway, the agents could see the touching farewell embrace as they kissed, and then saw the man—Nehemia—leaving his beloved and comforting her by shouting—in Russian, of course—that she should not worry; he would be back the following evening..

That same evening, Nehemia went to the contact, the woman who had provided us with train tickets before, and agreed that in the morning, at her ticket window, he would get the tickets for those leaving. For himself, he bought a ticket to Lvov.

After the plan was accomplished, Sarah was to return to Vilna and report to Mulka.

Clearly Mulka saw this campaign as the evacuation of our group from the

Soviet Union, and saw himself as personally responsible for its success or failure. Evacuating Shimon and Sarah meant the end of the Vilna outpost's work for the *bricha*.

... We did not sleep at all that night. We waited tensely for the knock on the door that would mean arrest. In the morning, I parted from Mulka. Ella took a basket on her arm and the two of us left the house, chatting of this and that and laughing often. We tried to mislead the detectives—see, we're going out, like everyone else in Vilna, to shop at the market.

Surveillance had been amplified. There were now at least ten of them, perhaps more. They were identifiable by their faces and their clothing. An army Jeep moved along behind us. What were our chances and why did they not arrest us immediately?

We assumed that the agents had been instructed to verify who we were and with whom we were meeting, and so on. To round out the operation's dossier and any future interrogation, they needed more information about our contacts.

We tried to lose them. We went into narrow, winding streets; we climbed stairs to the house where Ella's dentist lived, but did not find another way out at the other end, and had to retrace our steps and go on with the charade of shopping at the market. I explained to Ella what I was about to do. I knew that she was not the object of the tail. It was I who had to get away.

We were approaching the ruins of the ghetto. Ella made a sharp turn toward the market and I disappeared behind a ruined building. The Jeep could not go through there. I ran between the ruins, into dark basements and damp, dusty tunnels, and came out on some side street. I checked the area and was persuaded that I had no tail. I headed for the train station and stood innocently in line at the ticket window like anyone else. I tried to blend in. Nehemia walked by me and stuck a ticket in my hand, for a carriage that had been added behind the engine, for women and children.

When I entered the carriage I realized I was not the only man there. Evidently we were not the only ones with access to the tickets for mothers and their little ones.

As I walked up the aisle, a man with a forbidding face rose and offered me his seat—another warning that I was under surveillance. Had he offered his place to a woman, or a child, so be it. Some men who look like that are generous; but to give up his place for me, a young man?

Clearly, the man was on a mission.

Only then did I realize how trapped I was. I thanked the man profusely and sat down on the bench with three other passengers. I hung my raincoat on the hook behind me, took a book from my pocket and became engrossed in reading it. This happened to be a translation from the English of a memoir by the

head of the British secret service—though I had not noticed when I bought it that this was no ordinary secret agent. In my coat pocket I had a toothbrush, a bit of soap, a small bottle of cologne, a packet of cigarettes and matches; in my pants pocket—a great deal of money.

Finally the train began to move. Nehemia was sitting on the upper bench, across the aisle from me. We could see one another. I knew that Sarah was also sitting somewhere in that carriage.

This tail ... Maybe I was tired and my stretched nerves were deceiving me? Was it possible that the security services had invested so many resources to capture me? And if so, why didn't they arrest me?

During the preceding period—ever since the arrest in Moscow—I had been very tense. I didn't want to admit this even to myself. Actually, I had been physically and mentally tense since leaving Lvov in mid-August. A whole month. Again the previous night, I had not slept. Maybe I was imagining things? My nerves let up a little.

Nehemia signaled me with his eyes. On his way to the toilets he whispered that at least six agents from my tail were in the carriage. Beyond the partition, I heard Sarah's voice, flirting with one of the detectives, or maybe two of them, trying to distract them. An attractive young woman, she ought to be able to capture their attention, but where could I run to? When the train stopped at the stations, I went outside, like the other passengers, and asked the prices of the villagers' goods on sale, and I bought myself a tomato ... No, running away was impossible. They stuck very close, walking behind me, openly now ...

True, I had not slept for a few days now; true, I was exhausted, but I had no hesitation as to the clarity of my thinking. Nehemia, moreover, had warned me more than once.

An hour passed; then another. I was engrossed in the story of the head of British Intelligence, but did not absorb a word. One thought kept bothering me: We were getting close to Baranovich and I still had no solution to the main problem: What would happen when the train stopped in the station?

In my imagination, I could see Lyubka and the rest of our people standing on the platform and rushing up to me, all excited: "Hey, what's happening? Where is Pavlik? Come quickly, we already have the tickets, where are the documents from Karpov?" In any event I wouldn't be able to evade the agents sent to capture me—but if I made it to Baranovich, I would bring disaster down on the whole group ... I was the one leading the agents to them; I was the one liable to cause Lyubka's escape to fail, and Rachel, and the little girl, and Sarah, and Nehemia—each one with his traumatic past ...

I realized that I must not reach Baranovich!

I was not mistaken. These were not illusions. My mind was clear. I was not

panicked. I was only having an attack of nausea. I had to decide how to proceed. Time was passing. We had gone more than halfway already.

I knew I must not reach Baranovich! I, the one being followed, could send all the others to prison! I would not set foot on the platform at the Baranovich station. I wouldn't enter it. If I left the train at the station, the detectives would follow me. They were not hiding their intentions.

We passed the station at Lida, where Nehemia was caught about six years previously. We were two-thirds of the way there. My time was running out.

I got up, leaving my book on the seat, open to the page I was reading so I could resume when I got back, and I took my toothbrush and cigarettes and matches out of my pocket, fished a cigarette from the packet and stuck it in my mouth. I looked around me—ah, there were children there! I took the cigarette out of my mouth and walked to the doorway, the cigarette in one hand, the packet of matches in the other. So reasonable; so simple. The fellow was just going out into the corridor to open the door or the passageway to the next carriage, to enjoy a smoke. How long can a man do without a cigarette?

On the way out, I saw Sarah keeping a detective busy with her stories and her flirting ... well done!

I went into the lavatory, once again checked the contents of my pockets, tore up a few photographs and threw them in the toilet. I went back to the corridor near the entrance and peeked through the window in the door—we passed the signpost at eight kilometers from Lida, with another forty-two to Baranovich. In the window, I saw a line of sand racing toward me along the tracks.

"Yehareg v'al ya'avur!" [Hebrew, "Let him be killed rather than transgress" referring to self-sacrifice in Jewish law] Was this, then, what our forebears meant? Baranovich?—I opened the door and jumped.

Well done. I landed heavily and hurt myself, with my nose in the sand, but the pain was bearable. Evidently nothing was broken. Even my glasses were intact. All the cars on the train went past me. Why so slowly? Some soldier sitting on the steps at the carriage entrance shouted something to me. I stayed low to the ground so as not to be seen. If the train would just go by already, just go by and continue on its way ... another minute or two, seeming so long ...

The train pulled away. Was it slowing down? I held my breath. No, it just seemed that way. The train pulled farther away. Who cared if someone jumped or fell from a doorway or a window? Let him drink less vodka!

Get away from the tracks, I thought; can't hide on the rails. Get to the city, into the city, fast! My arms and legs were working, and the pain passed. I could walk ...

I had to return to Vilna. But I wouldn't take a chance on going by train. Soon they would discover my absence, they would report it, they would send reinforcements to search for me ...

To Vilna—to find Mulka!

I had more than a hundred kilometers ahead of me. I planned on two days to get there.

A clear autumn day, and the weather was pleasant ... Onward!

I was screwing them!

Nehemia also opted to jump from the speeding train ... here is his description, from the memoir he wrote later, in Israel:

By chance, Yaka was sitting next to a goy, a railroad worker. After the Lida station, the worker went out to the platform and came back a while later, very upset: "Did you hear? They wanted to arrest me; they wanted me to tell them where my friend was, the one with the glasses!" Needless to say, the goy knew nothing about it. I listened doubly hard, while pretending not to have noticed anything special or to be paying attention. I felt a few pairs of eyes slanted in my direction, but decided to take a little nap ... Yaka had left a book in Russian on his seat. It was a translation of a memoir by a famous English spy, published in Russia—absolutely a legal book—but under present circumstances, a book about spying only spurred them to imagine things. Sarah got off in Baranovich with the child and the young man, still intent on her mission, and (as we later learned) she met there with the two families, exchanged their documents—and they set off and crossed the border safely. But I continued my journey. After I was left alone, they didn't take their eyes off me. This time they almost failed to follow protocol. At every station where I got out of the carriage—they got out after me; everywhere I went—they went. We were travelling at night, but the hours passed quickly and dawn was breaking. I took stock inwardly, and considered: If I travel to Lvov, they will follow me everywhere. Should I return to Vorkuta? Wherever they arrest me, in the end, and in the best case, even if I say nothing, won't I still get 10 years anyway? Then, in a flash, I made up my mind.

I stood up casually, yawning, took a bite of an apple and left half of it on my seat. I looked at my book and laid it down, open. I went to the toilet. I did not have much time, so I worked fast. I removed the little window hatch and squeezed my head and body out until I was more or less in an upright position on the other side. The train was hurling along at 80 or 90 km an hour (it was an express train). The wind pummeled my face. I turned forwards and jumped. For a few minutes I was in shock. When I came to, I realized I was in a bad way. Unfortunately, I'd fallen on a pile of stones alongside the tracks and hurt my head. Blood was streaming from a cut on my head, I could

barely see out of one eye, half my face was puffy and I was covered with blood. I knew that I mustn't remain where I was, about 15 km beyond Rovno. The search for me would commence quickly. I took off my shirt and tore it into strips. Nearby was a small stream; I washed my face and cleaned the wound. From the strips of cloth, I made a primitive bandage and began walking rapidly away from the train tracks through the villages and the fields ...

Nehemia began wandering from village to village. In one place, they bandaged his head; in another, they cared for him when the wound developed complications. He told people he was a peddler, and when he met a group of policemen, he said he'd gotten drunk at a wedding. The police checked his documents anyway, but because his papers said he'd been born in the area—a miracle!—they let him go on his way. He went to Rovno, and remembered that, when he had visited that city with Mulka—looking for an escape route to Czechoslovakia—he had met a Jewish barber there. This time the man seemed suspicious of him, so he went on to the community center, slept there one night, and saw that a great many observers took note of people passing through. He went back to the barber and rested there awhile. He sent a telegram to Vilna—no reply; sent another—again no one answered. He feared to try again, lest he arouse more suspicion.

The barber had a daughter, and for some reason Nehemia told her the truth; if not the whole truth, then part of it. The young woman, initially suspicious and hostile, changed her attitude.

... I felt that something major was going on with her. She said to me in a whisper: "Your fate is now mine." She confessed to me that she had suspected that I was a speculator, part of a gang, and that's why she had been hostile ...

The barber's daughter began handling the postal duties for the refugee she had adopted—but there was no reply. Nehemia decided to go back to Vilna. He found no one in his apartment. The apartment itself was silent, the windows shuttered.

Nehemia knew the address of the "Tsaddik of Sodom"—the Lithuanian. From him, Nehemia learned that some of his comrades were in Baranovich, so off he went.

I, meanwhile, headed for Vilna.

I detoured around the main roads and the train tracks; I kept away from people. The security services had invested a lot of energy in trying to capture me—had they given up? Most likely they would have stationed their forces at roadblocks around the area where I had disappeared. I detoured around Lida, of

course, but on the outskirts of the town I replenished my supply of food and went on. I was hoping that the detectives who had “lost” me would not recover before arriving in Baranovich, and that only from there would they report to the officers in charge of the mission.

I walked all day. I covered more than half the distance, and then at night I went into a farmer’s house and asked if I could sleep there. I told him that I was visiting on behalf of some agency and heading to the nearby town, but that I seem to have lost my way. I gave the name of my supposed agency with an acronym for a long, complicated name and prefaced it with the syllable “gos” meaning “of the state.” The two of us sat down to eat and to talk. The man was a quick-witted Belorussian farmer, and during our conversation he began to trust me, finally venting his bitterness toward the authorities who confiscate the fruit of all his hard labor.

“See, tomorrow I will pile the cart high with grain and bring it to the appointed place. Otherwise I will be arrested as a “saboteur”—sabotaging the state economy! There they will check the quality of my grain, weigh it, and give me a receipt for it. All nice and legal. With the receipt, I will go to the office across the street and they will pay me cash according to their prices. Also legal. I will take the money, go to the kiosk there, use it to buy a glass of soda or two—and farewell to the entire cartload of grain that I brought. And the same for the mandatory allotment of pork, potatoes, milk ... If I don’t fill the quota levied on me, they will come and confiscate some of my property; and if it happens again—they will arrest me and find me guilty of sabotaging the state economy. Sabotage! Ten years in jail!”

Willy-nilly, the farmer accepted these conditions, so long as the authorities did not force him to join a *kolkhoz*, about which he already knew enough. He worked at night, gathered firewood in the state-owned forest (as long as he could get away with it), and kept a few cattle and chickens on the sly—if only he could avoid a *kolkhoz*. In Western Belorussia, liberated from the Polish yoke, they had not yet instituted “collectivization”—a term that terrified the farmers. I promised him—I, the big-city man, the official inspector for a state agency—assured him that the day was still far off, that the party had decided to postpone the collectivization of the western farmlands. The man was beside himself with joy; he fed me what he had and gave me a bed. Let him be, I thought; he had enough troubles for now ... In the morning, I paid him a suitable amount for the food and lodging—he could hardly believe his eyes: the Messiah had come! A state official paying for room and board!—and we parted.

I continued walking westward. Somewhere along the way, I climbed on a truck going in my direction and gave my tired feet a rest. Inwardly, I gave thanks for our movement’s education—we were always crazy about taking long hikes, carrying heavy packs on our backs.

When I got to the banks of the Viliya, which bisects Vilna, the sun was already setting. On the far bank of the river, a few lights twinkled in the “Zoo” quarter. I found someone with a boat to ferry me across. I made slow progress. When I was sure that no one was following me, I made my way as darkness fell to the house of the “*Tsaddik* of Sodom”—the Lithuanian who had encouraged us and our aspirations, and with whom I had maintained contact.

I knocked. His wife opened the door and ushered me into the hallway, where I gave the man and his wife a frank account of my last three days. I thought I had shed my pursuers, I said, adding that if they were worried, or had any hesitation, I would not stay—I would go back to the forest to sleep. Before I finished speaking, they brought me inside, fed me and offered me a bed in their library. My host told me that Mulka and also a woman “from among your comrades” had looked for me there, but he did not know where they were now.

I fell asleep and slept the sleep of the righteous.

The next day, the *tsaddik* went out to search for my friends, but returned without having found any of them.

I decided to wait. It wasn’t possible that none of them were to be found.

The *tsaddik* was from the generation of the liberal intelligentsia of Czarist Russia. On the shelves of his well-stocked library I found a great many interesting books, but for some reason I pulled out a volume that told about the Spanish Inquisition and its methods of interrogating the “heretics.”

I spent time talking with my hosts, who among other things showed me the hidden niche they had constructed in one of the rooms, during the war, and in which they had hidden a Jewish family for an extended period. His neighbors—he said—would never have dreamed of betraying him; not from a love of Jews but because of how they felt about him personally. But now once again he wasn’t certain of these neighbors. The current regime had ravaged people’s hearts, even more than the prior one, he said.

I made no comment.

I told myself that I had to find Mulka. If I couldn’t manage it myself within a day or two, I would have to find out where he was via his sister Ruth in Riga; how else would he send word to me of his whereabouts? And my next thought: What about Brauda? If Chaim had crossed the border to Poland—or been arrested—who would stay in touch with Brauda?

When the sun began to set, my host stood me next to the window so that I could see what was happening outside without being seen, myself.

“Note the man standing behind the tree, not far from the house. He has been standing there a few hours already. Someone was sent to keep an eye on me. Perhaps not because of you. There is a witch hunt in progress against our nationalists, and there may be someone suspect living in this area. But I thought I should tell you that someone from a surveillance team is in the neighborhood.”

I decided to get out of there. I would wait until dark—and slip away. Arrests are made at night.

I asked the Lithuanian to check when the train to Riga was leaving and to get me a ticket, if he could. He went out and came back a little while later with a ticket, saying that the train left the Vilna station at midnight. I would be in Riga before morning.

I parted cordially with this righteous pair. I left by the kitchen door and went through the neighbors' orchards. I came to a field. I waited for the appointed hour and made my way through the dark streets to the Lintvarovo station—the first stop on the line from Vilna to Riga. When the train came, I burst out of the dark, through the people standing on the platform and climbed aboard. The night seemed very long as I planned my next steps.

I knew that I had to avoid being seen at the Riga train station, for one obvious reason: numerous secret agents were posted at all the stations, and in the city where I was born and grew up it was very possible that someone would recognize me.

As morning broke, I left the train at the stop before Riga, Torņakalna. I took a streetcar and soon arrived at one of the commercial centers of the city. I climbed the stairs of an old building to the roomy offices where N., whom I had known before the war, was employed. I went over to her desk and stood there, and when she looked up, she was startled. She soon recovered, smiled, and said softly: "And I thought you were running around the streets of Tel Aviv ..."

I did not conceal from her that they were after me. I asked whether I could stay with her for a few days. She wrote an address on a slip of paper, holding it in her hand; after I had read it and nodded my head, she said quietly: "Goodbye, and say hello to my sister for me."

A quiet, polite conversation between a clerk and a customer.

When I left, I saw an empty truck, its driver waiting beside it. I asked him if he would take me to a suburb on the other side of the city. He shook his head no, but when I took a few bills out of my pocket and named a sum—the "shock method" did it again! He told me to climb aboard. Someone on the sidewalk called my name—I did not answer—the truck began moving. I looked back and saw a young man who had once been a member of the movement in a distant town. I had not seen him for many years; of course he was happy to see me safe and sound ...

We crossed the city. The truck finally stopped in front of a large home. I went up the steps and the sister opened the door. She was, naturally, surprised to see me. I explained that I had been to see her sister and had asked if I might stay at their home. "Of course." She showed me where I could wash; and there was the sofa. My exhaustion evidently showed in my face. I asked her to telephone from somewhere outside the house to Ruth, Mulka's sister, and invite her to come over

in a few hours. I fell asleep. When I awoke, Ruth was sitting next to me. She had heard nothing of Mulka. I asked her to find the illustrator because I wanted to see her, and to arrange for someone to phone the hotel where Attorney Brauda was staying and find out when I could meet with him.

Where was Mulka? Had the others crossed the border safely, or been caught? Had Mulka been arrested? How would I find out?

Sarah, Eli and his anonymous friend, and the little girl left the train at Baranovich. I had disappeared. Nehemia proceeded on the Rovno-Lvov train. Would Nehemia go to Lvov? Sarah did not know the answer. She had witnessed him being followed on the train, and prayed in her heart that he would not go to Lvov, but rather come back to find his comrades and her.

Sarah told the two young men to remain in the Baranovich train station and await her further instructions. These two knew nothing of the dramatic events occurring during the journey. As for the little girl—the one being taken to her parents—Sarah had to take her along wherever she went. The child refused to be parted from her.

We had a foot in the door at an apartment in Baranovich, a one-room flat with two families living in it—a young couple, a husband who'd been conscripted into the army and his very pregnant wife—and the wife's parents. They saw our people as speculators, profiteers who paid handsomely for services. When one of our comrades lodged with them—Chaim, Lyubka or someone else—they would give him a mattress on the floor, and that was it. The arrival of Sarah and her companions meant cramming as many people as possible into the room—Lyubka and his family, Chaim and his wife—there was not enough room for the others and they had to manage outdoors. Fortunately, the autumn weather was comfortable and there was no rain ...

Very early in the morning, Lyubka and Sarah went to Karpov and gave him the list, and he told them to come back later and he would have the documents ready. The two agreed with Karpov that when I showed up, he would give me an exit permit to Poland. The group was supposed to leave very early the next morning on the train bound for Brest and cross the border there. When they left, they were supposed to get Karpov's documents from Sarah and give her back the Soviet documents. When they arrived in Poland they were to telegraph immediately to Vilna and confirm that everyone was safe.

The people finally left the house and Sarah went back to bring the Soviet documents. They were hidden in a crack in the wall of the outhouse, situated in the yard next to the house as was customary in such places. While inside the outhouse retrieving the documents, she glimpsed through another crack in the wall an officer entering the house. She held her breath. Her mind was racing without thoughts of how to get away and warn her comrades, but the officer came out

again—and she saw that it was Mulka, in a pressed uniform, but without insignia of rank. She went out to him and related what had been happening with their group. On the spot, Mulka decided to go to Rovno and look for Nehemia—he sensed that Nehemia would not have continued on to Lvov, once I had disappeared and he had considered how seriously they were hunting him.

Sarah wanted to go back to Vilna. Mulka was against it: “There is nothing for you to do there,” he said; “in Vilna, the ground is burning underfoot.” Sarah did not budge. She had a feeling that in Vilna she would see traces pointing her to Nehemia and me. She also wanted to verify that the people who had crossed into Poland had in fact arrived there safely.

Mulka told her to wait for him in Baranovich. He himself went to Rovno but returned as he had gone—Nehemia had disappeared. Then he went again to Baranovich—again returning empty-handed, but he was still hoping that the missing comrades would come to Baranovich. Sarah stood firm and in the end Mulka gave in; she went to Vilna after Mulka had given her the address of the *tsaddik* and of one more person—the man who had once helped Mishka Levine go back into prison posing as a prosecutor, to meet his comrade jailed in the affair of the vehicle convoy.

When Sarah got to the *tsaddik* and gave him our code sign, he told her that I had been at his house and gone to Riga. She was greatly relieved: one had been found! She went on to her apartment and saw that the doors were locked and the shutters closed. At her neighbor’s, she checked whether any telegrams had arrived for her from Poland, but found nothing. She did not despair—and was duly rewarded.

Sarah:

... I returned to my neighbor’s apartment. “No, no telegram has come.” I decided to go to the post office; maybe I’d find something there. There were two young women working there. I asked them if there was a telegram for me from Poland; they did not want to look, so I said that I would pay them. They looked and found nothing. I asked them to let me look among the telegrams that had recently arrived, perhaps I could find something—so I made the effort, and there it was. The address was so scrambled that the telegram could never have been delivered; in effect, it had no address—apparently the comrades had been so excited that they could not write properly. And although the text was very confused, I understood that they were all safe.

They had arrived. All of them. Even the little girl whose parents were waiting somewhere for her. What a relief.

The next day, Sarah set out on her way. She rode in a truck—in exchange for payment, of course—and at some point switched to the train, which took her back to Baranovich. At every possible location, she left word for Nehemia that Mulka wanted him to come to Baranovich.

Sarah:

... I met Mulka in a field near the station. When I told him everything I knew, he was beside himself with joy. He was so happy. He ran to the nearest telephone and called Riga. They told him that Yaka had gone to Moscow ...

This news, which he heard from Ruth, left him the task of gathering up the three who remained.

Shimon and Ella were on their way to Riga and may already have left there. Mulka had sent them to check whether I was there. Now he told them to come to Baranovich. When they arrived, he moved them to one of the neighboring villages and told them to await his instructions.

Nehemia, having completed his adventurous trek in the vicinity of Rovno, arrived at last in Vilna, where he was told to go to Baranovich.

I was in Moscow.

Ruth came back and related to me that at the hotel, they had told her husband that Brauda had been there but had already returned to Moscow. Did that mean that he had decided to quit defending Ilka Zaiden and his comrades? In that light, was it necessary for me to go to Moscow and meet with him, in spite of the risk?

Here, in Riga, I was only a few streets away from the home of Ilka Zaiden, who was rotting in the secret police dungeon, while his mother was dying and his sister helpless. Declining to attempt to persuade Brauda in Moscow that he must defend our comrade—particularly since this was the only thing, even if largely symbolic, that could be done for him at this point—struck me as a dereliction of duty, even betrayal of a friend.

Were they after us—or what? We had managed to avoid our surveillance and had learned that the Soviet regime was omnipotent only when “volunteers” provided it with “proof” and when its victims themselves hastened to the offices of its secret services to “confess” and name the names of their “partners in crime.”

We had long since learned how in this country sons could turn on their fathers, women on their husbands ... and not just from the illustrator, who all her life had been vulnerable during various purges. We had experienced the insanity that gripped millions of people in this unfortunate land; had heard the stories of the students from Kiev, with whom we had made friends in Tashkent, about

the fate of their parents; had listened to Nehemia's stories of what he had been through in the forced labor camps. All of that had opened our eyes to the nature of this regime.

... And the fear? We refused to let fear stop us.

The feeling grew that, if we did not persevere in helping our prisoners—no matter how reasonable or logical the excuse—they would have every right to judge us unfavorably. Even if they never said so, their silence would be loud and eloquent.

Our “fighting spirit” was at its peak, since nothing amplifies success like success. Mulka had escaped pursuit in Lvov? Fled detention in Brest? Babke had rescued Nehemia from the lion's den? Nehemia had gotten away from the train? I had escaped their clutches when half a dozen agents had been glued to my tail?

To hell with it! We would screw them!

The illustrator appeared immediately, sure that I had not withstood the stress of separation. I did not try to hide the truth from her. I told her why I was going. The suggestion that we go together made her dizzy.

Self-criticism:

My night journey from Vilna to Riga: Was the logical justification for this exercise invented to cover a desire to see her again?

Theoretically not. And where could I have gone from the house of the “Tsaddik from Sodom”?

Was my future visit to Brauda in Moscow an excuse to enable me to prolong what might be my last meeting with her?

Now, really—how is that relevant? Am I exempt from working on behalf of the prisoners? Am I supposed to sit and wait until one of my comrades—Mulka, for example—replaces me in Riga?

Everything I did, was right ...

Right?

If the illustrator had not been in Riga, and if she had not had to go back to Moscow—would I have behaved as I did, rushing to Riga, and from there to Moscow, when “the ground was burning underfoot”?

You seek the benefit of the doubt (I told myself), eh?

If we had a “comrades’ tribunal” (I asked myself), would it not judge you unfavorably? Would it be inclined to accept your explanations wholeheartedly?

Or: If you were supposed to see Brauda in Lvov—rather than in Riga—would you have taken the risk and gone to Lvov—or anywhere else where the illustrator was not?

“I suppose, your honors—beg pardon—comrade judges, that I would have had the strength to do so. Perhaps I would have needed encouragement and support, a blessing on the journey ... I believe that I would not have relinquished one last chance to reach out to my friends, no matter how poor the odds. Hence I would ask to be excused on the grounds, at least, of reasonable doubt ... I confess that this doubt bothers me, too ... but if I had reached Poland and embarked for Palestine feeling that I had not done absolutely everything; that I had missed an opportunity, perhaps the last one; that my strength had given out right at the end ... ”

No, no, I have no regrets.

Particularly since I had Mulka to measure up to ...

We were very careful. We did not buy our train tickets at the ticket window; they were brought to us. We changed apartments and finally we snuck out to a waiting taxi that took us to the station. Although we made sure that we had no tail, we took the precaution of not leaving the train at the main Moscow station. Instead, we got off at a distant suburb and went on from there by taxi.

At my request, the illustrator went to see Brauda. At the meeting she arranged for me, I told him that I would no longer be in charge of the matter, and that Chaim was ill and it was doubtful if he could meet with him. Brauda grasped that something was not right with our group and was worried, but I was able to calm him. He promised to continue handling both cases. It was arranged that the remaining payment would be made to him via Dora, Ilka's sister.

It seems as if we did everything we possibly could, although it wasn't much.

From Shimon and Ella, whom Mulka had sent to Riga to look for me, he learned that I was in Moscow with the illustrator. In the evening he telephoned me at her house and explained bluntly that he was in Baranovich and wanted me to come there immediately. The Baranovich-Moscow train ran only three times a week. The next day I got a ticket and in the small hours of September 25th, I set out for Baranovich.

I parted from her.

I left tired and crushed. I had been on the road for six or seven weeks, and the tension kept growing. On the train ride, which took two nights and a day, I found it hard to fall asleep. A sense of impending disaster gnawed at me—even if I managed to escape their clutches, they would certainly deal with the illustrator. How would she cope?

Very early on the morning of Friday, September 27th, the train stopped alongside the platform at Baranovich. Mulka was waiting for me.

We surveyed the area. We did not notice any surveillance.

Mulka explained the situation: He had transferred both couples—Shimon and Ella, Nehemia and Sarah—to neighboring villages. This evening they would go straight to the train and this very night we would all go to Brest.

During the day, Mulka had to get documents for all six of us from Karpov, including his and mine—"the Fishman brothers." We thought this an auspicious name. We had also decided that it was better if we did not all travel on the same train to Brest. At eight in the evening a train from Homel passed through Baranovich and stopped at a local station at Polesia, and then continued westward to Brest; at ten, the Moscow-Warsaw train stopped at the main station at Baranovich, and later on at Brest. We therefore agreed that the two couples would leave from the local station, while "the Fishman brothers" would board the express at the main station. At Brest the four of them would wait for Mulka and me and when we arrived, we would all do the border check together; assuming we got through—we would go on to Lodz.

... We arrived at "our" apartment. I lay down and tried to nap a little, without success. Mulka advised that we not sit in the apartment, in case someone showed up and got suspicious; better to spend the time at the neglected city park.

He had known that I would get out of Moscow by the skin of my teeth and show up without luggage, not even personal items. A man crossing to Poland without at least some underwear, shoes, a coat, would arouse suspicion. So he bought me, at the market, an autumn topcoat and a few other things. For me, the day was long and tiring. I felt my exhaustion getting the better of me. I needed sleep. Inwardly I harbored fears for the fate of those we had left behind—in the prisons and in the "relative freedom" that this country accorded its citizens.

Mulka, too, was depressed, but one would not have known it from his behavior. His brother-in-law's refusal to leave—mainly because of the baby—troubled him.

"We got more than four hundred people out, safely across the border, but my sister and her family I am unable to budge!" he grumbled again. I knew that this upset and angered him.

Mulka got our documents from Karpov.

I went to the Polesia train station whence the two couples were to leave for Brest. At eight in the evening I gave Nehemia—Polish-speaking head of the group—all the documents required for him and his people: a personal document for each one—four in all; two family documents—one per couple—and another group document for six, including the two "Fishman brothers"—Mulka and me. I retrieved from the four their personal Soviet documents. Henceforth they would be Polish repatriates in every sense. I shook their hands and returned to the apartment.

I still had two personal documents and a family document for the Fishman brothers, Pavel and Yacov.

We did not stay long in the darkness of the apartment in Baranovich. At ten, the Moscow express was set to leave from the main station in the area.

Would we meet again?

Within less than an hour after their arrival at Brest, the four should have seen us, Mulka and me, getting off the Moscow express; the two of us were supposed to show the duty officer or the sergeant, at the border inspection station, the group document for all of us, the three family documents for the three families and the six personal documents.

Nehemia, Sarah, Shimon and Ella searched in vain for the Fishman brothers among the passengers disembarking from the Moscow night express in Brest ... and in vain they would wait for the next train, wondering if we had been unable to get tickets, or had missed the train, or who knows what ... but in their hearts, they already sensed disaster.

Shimon and Ella stayed with the luggage and made themselves inconspicuous; since they spoke no Polish, they had to converse together in Yiddish. For two days, Nehemia and Sarah met every train entering the station, hoping we would show up. Perhaps—if we had been caught—we would manage to escape and arrive some other way ...

After two days, they decided to get out of there; lingering at a border town would incur suspicion. After a brief conference, Nehemia took the documents to the repatriation office. The clerk who sat there was Jewish. Nehemia explained that the Fishman brothers had been attached to their party but that there was no family connection; possibly the Fishman brothers—whom he wouldn't recognize in person—had fallen ill or been delayed in order to make arrangements about something and they, the two couples, were not obliged nor able to wait for late-comers ...

The clerk acquiesced, issued them a new group document and promised that if the Fishman brothers came to him—he would issue them a document for the two of them, as required.

Nehemia thanked the clerk and the two couples left for the border checkpoint. The four repatriates passed the routine inspection safely—the inspectors did not even bother to rifle through their scanty belongings. They boarded the train and, a little while later, crossed the Polish border.

With heavy hearts.

The Price

After I returned from the train station at Polesia with the four sets of Soviet documents, darkness had already fallen on the city. At nine, we took the Soviet documents—those of our four friends, and our own—and hid them in the privy in back of the house where we were staying. Mulka and I, each with a suitcase in hand, walked to the main train station. We walked through thickets and brush, alert, checking to see if we were followed. We arrived at the station. Mulka, telling me to stay under cover nearby, went to the ticket window and walked up to the counter. A woman was standing in front of him, and when the ticket window opened, she bought a ticket to Brest. Mulka bought two tickets and rejoined me. When the Moscow express stopped, we walked to the platform. The three of us—the unknown woman and we—climbed the steps of the carriage next to the engine and began walking slowly along the narrow corridor, looking for empty seats. A few young toughs in civilian clothes, who appeared to have entered the coach from both ends, approached us and suddenly grabbed us by the arms and began patting us down for weapons. We realized that they were security agents.

“*B’seder!*” said Mulka to me in Hebrew (“Okay”) as they approached us.

“*B’seder?*” The sound of that “*B’seder!*” has been with me ever since ... Was it a disparaging last comment on our activities? Was he trying to encourage me, to say that things would work out? Or was he referring to our friends who had been rescued from prison thanks to the precise planning of the rescue operation? Or maybe, just maybe he meant that we had “fixed their wagon” pretty well in spite of everything, having managed a *bricha* campaign that accomplished so much?

Maybe. But that newer, idiomatic meaning of “fixing their wagon” was one we had not yet learned.

The bewildered woman was taken, along with the two of us, to the security services’ office at the Baranovich train station. After a brief check, they released her; she even had time to board the train. They sat us down on a bench. They never took their eyes off us.

We began protesting, arguing that we would miss our train: “Why are we being detained? Our papers are in order ... ”

They replied that this was a routine check by the OBKhSS (an acronym for the Department Against Misappropriation of Socialist Property, which battled speculators and embezzlers and the like).

We were not convinced and we harbored no illusions.

The detectives ordered us to empty our pockets and place the contents on the table. They took the personal papers Karpov had supplied, the money and a pocket knife. A few of the toughs took us outside to a car, put us inside, and sat

on either side of us, bringing us to what they called the “Internal” unit, i.e., the security services lockup. Now they conducted a much more careful body search—they undressed me, looking in body crevices, poking my underwear; then they searched my suitcase.

They seemed to find my documents amazing—most likely it was the name Fishman, which evidently did not satisfy them and may even have surprised them. During the search, which lasted over an hour, they said almost nothing to me, only asking me repeatedly to tell them my name. Maybe they hoped to find some document with my real name on it? Maybe they worried that they had arrested the wrong man?

My impression was that Mulka was being taken care of in the room next door.

After they were done searching, they wrote down what they had found, signed it, packed up all my belongings and gave me my clothes back—except my belt and my shoelaces—and put me into an empty cell.

I was not surprised at this treatment. My many talks with Nehemia, with all his experience of Soviet prisons and forced labor camps, now took on the aspect of a crash course for the new prisoner. Slightly awed, I noted to myself that I was not beaten, I did not hear shouts or cursing; I did not even experience the negative personal treatment so characteristic of the typical Soviet clerk in response to any sort of annoyance or departure from routine. There was something grotesque in the strange conviviality surrounding the very thorough check of my belongings. The careful examination of my socks, for example, held up to the light of the table lamp; the examiner’s subsequent declaration, or declamation: “One pair of short brown socks,” and the expression on the face of his comrade, bending over his lined tablet with the colored copy, silently recording this item with no utterance of any sort escaping him; the room ringing with an almost festive silence, any interruption of which would comprise a vulgar flesh-and-blood interference with a sacred *modus operandi* almost but not quite reminiscent of a prayer service in a house of worship.

My impression was that during the search, they did not know what would be done with me, what I was wanted for. Clearly, they were not behaving logically.

Nonetheless I assumed that the interrogation would proceed in Baranovich, since our documents were signed by Karpov, in Baranovich. Had he fled, as he said he would if we were arrested and he found out about it? Had he found out? In time?

If truth be told, it was not Karpov’s fate that worried me. Our arrest focused our concern on the four who had left for Brest. I was convinced that the security agents who dealt with me and with Mulka knew all about the border-crossing arrangements of the repatriates at the border. When they took possession of our two personal documents—Pavel Michaelovich and Yaacov Michaelovich Fishman—and our joint family document—they would have noticed right away the absence

of another document, without which we could not have crossed the border—and that was the group document. Even if just the two of us were being repatriated, we would have had to possess a group document as well, and it was unreasonable to suppose that the two of us—young men who were obviously not country bumpkins—would set out on this journey without that document. Hence the missing document was in someone else’s possession, and that “someone” might be trying to cross the border. The officers dealing with our arrest would pick up the phone and call Karpov’s office, since his name and signature appeared on our documents, to ask him who else was listed in our group; it would have been enough to have telephoned Brest and asked the officer at the border checkpoint to hold for interrogation whoever was accompanying the Fishman brothers.

This chain of thought was frightening. This was what was giving me the shakes. I feared that, the next morning, they would parade all four of them in front of me, and the prospect made me sleepless. I did not doubt for even a moment that Mulka was equally concerned. He could not have helped but worry about it.

Still, we had done well not to have set out all together on one train. Just possibly they might get away, although it was hard to imagine that the authorities would fail to catch them. Every whisper that reached my ear from outside my cell evoked the sense that, okay, now they are coming to question me about the people who accompanied us. I would have to remain silent, act as if I didn’t understand what they were after, to “drive them crazy”—anything but to give them an opportunity to conclude that there were other people who had indeed left with us to make this journey.

If only we had discussed with the four that, even if the two of us did not arrive at the agreed time, they themselves should immediately cross into Poland! Would they think of that? No. They would wait. And meantime, the authorities would net them, too.

Sarah and Ella, both concentration camp survivors, once again in the hands of jailors who torture and abuse ... Nehemia, sent back after a brief spring to the permanent Arctic winter ... Shimon dragged before a court-martial: Deserter! Traitor! Death by firing squad!

We should have told them that if we did not arrive in their wake as promised, they should run to the forest, separate, hide, get away from the border, find new ID papers—and only then, a few months later, leave one by one, each with their new identity, and find somewhere else to cross the border into Poland.

It was easy enough in hindsight.

The cell was large, relatively speaking, and I had it to myself. Three times during the day they brought me something to eat, but I had trouble overcoming the nausea induced by the foul-smelling food, the half-baked bread and the color-

less, lukewarm tea. I left most of it and reminded myself that during my time in Tashkent I would swallow anything and dream about another helping. Was I pampering myself or had the tension taken away my appetite? Would I be sorry later about the meal I had not eaten—and when would that be?

I paced for a few hours inside those four walls. I assumed that the interrogation would begin before the day was over, but I was not called. My time was my own. I tried to organize, in my own mind, how I would behave.

... I wouldn't talk about the substance of things, lest the interrogators learn of the four who were out there somewhere—time was working in their favor now; I would stick to the story that the two of us were brothers, and Polish, even if they proved to me that I was lying; if I were caught out in a lie—even a crude one—it was not a disaster, since I had a right to defend myself however I thought best; I would refuse to answer a question if the reply—no matter what it was—might harm me or my friends; I would not argue with them at this stage—when you argue, you can make mistakes and say too much; I would not believe the interrogators if they claimed that Mulka had begun to “sing”; nor would I believe them if they talked reasonably; but the main thing was to say as little as possible, because one word leads to another.

From the distant past, my memory dredged up the triple warning: No fear; no hope; no requests. This was the formula for prisoners of the socialist underground movements in Tsarist Russia; if you followed it, you could avoid sin. Don't be afraid, because your detention was fact, it had already happened, and if you show fear you only make things worse for yourself; don't hope that they will forgive you or have mercy on you; and don't ask for anything, because nothing will be given to you without a *quid pro quo*.

These pessimistic conclusions were based on long experience, courtesy of Mother Russia.

What was relevant in Tsarist Russia was now all the more so.

Another day of waiting; another day of pacing my cell. When would the interrogation commence?

They woke me up during the night. My first feeling: now it begins! They ordered me to dress and take my few belongings with me, and brought me to a room where a few men in civilian clothes were sitting. They pointed to some clothing and underwear in the corner, and explained that my brother had left them for me, and had also left some money — about a thousand rubles. They asked me if what I was given was agreeable to me, as it was “to my advantage.” I said I agreed. I would not start arguing with Mulka via these intermediaries. And anyway, what did money matter now, or belongings ...

“There is a bottle of vodka here that belongs to you. The money and the vodka will be taken by the people who travel with you.”

Travel? No one explains, and I don't ask. They wouldn't tell the truth anyhow. I had to sign my name to show that I had received all the items and that I had no claim against this prison.

That's how they treat a prisoner? Like a worker who's been fired?

I dressed and was taken by a few men to the dark prison yard, where they put me into a car. On either side of me were armed men. A few minutes later, we arrived at the train station. We remained sitting in the car until the train entered the station. I saw "Brest-Moscow" on the side of one of the carriages. It was an express, the one that should have brought us—me and Mulka—to Brest. Now it was returning from the border—eastward.

Evidently they were taking me to Minsk. This train would stop there. I know its route. The interrogation would be conducted there, in the capital of the Belorussian Republic. Five men, two wearing the uniform of officers in the regular army, boarded with me and put me into one of the compartments evidently reserved for us in advance. The men accompanying us were tight-lipped. Nor was I inclined to converse. I could see that they were a guard detail, nothing more. They told me that with the money they were carrying for me, I could have them buy me food and drink at the next station kiosk—anything non-alcoholic. If I wanted to order sleeping accommodations, I could, if I paid for them myself. I was not a prisoner, only a detainee.

What did I care about my legal status? Or that I didn't know why they arrested me?

Wait, wait ... Why a bed? Going to Moscow? Yes, evidently we were going to Moscow. There was only the rest of tonight, the next day and another night. The following morning we would reach the capital. I'd already traveled that route on this train. Let them get me a bed, and bring me food.

At one of the intermediate stations, one of them left and came back with whatever he had been able to buy. The selection was not much, but neither were my requirements. At my request, and at my expense, they also bought me a book to read. We barely spoke, and even amongst themselves they conversed in whispers.

During the day, everyone was awake. At night, three of them slept and two did not take their eyes off me, although I could not have bested even one of them. When I went to the toilet, two came with me. One stayed in the doorway, the other came in with me and stood by the window. In the corridor, one walked ahead of me and the other behind me. They had decided to take no chances—they would not permit me to escape from them again. They had learned the lesson of the escape from the train at Lida. Not these agents; their superiors.

Apparently we were being handled by the main office of the Ministry of State Security in Moscow. We assumed that in Moscow, a special task force—an "*obergrupp*a"—had been assembled to do the job properly and bring us in. Such a team has a lot of power, but also weaknesses. Its strength comes from being an opera-

tional tool of Moscow, meaning that everyone else has to provide any assistance required; its weakness was in the illusion harbored by its people that they know everything—whereas regarding the details, such as not knowing which permits are needed to cross the border, and not looking into who had signed the repatriation documents, they disparaged the local level, who were involved in everything, and failed.

My guard detail's role was limited: bring me to the destination. The local security services had not been able to arrest us, and the central authorities feared that, once again, they might miss an opportunity to put us on trial.

They were guarding the exits. The door was locked. They had the key. Even when we went in a convoy to the toilet, one of them stationed himself at the carriage doorway—in case I jumped past, opened it ... Then go and stop the train!

I climbed up to the top bunk, lay down on the mattress I'd rented and lost myself in reading. It's a good thing I had something to read. Though the heroic deeds of the partisan Kovpak don't really excite me, still it was better than nothing. Reading is relaxing.

I began to wonder how well I would stand the test. I had never been beaten, tortured, or humiliated ... now, my turn had come: Yacov Ben Mendel, this is your hour ...

What would they do to us? What were they capable of doing to us? Would they bring our people back from Poland to the Soviet Union? Whew! More than four hundred, maybe four hundred and fifty, were on their way to Palestine. Weren't they? Many of them had already arrived ... They could not bring those people back. They would simply have no way to do that. It was inconceivable.

Slowly I formulated the notion of "They shall not return the people!" as the slogan for the battle now shaping up, and which could not be avoided.

They could not return them. Out of the question. If I believed that they could, then ... no, no, they would not. They had no power to do that. No point in exaggerating their power. We had already seen them make mistakes, seen them fail. The comrades at the *ma'on*, who already know that some disaster has overtaken us, will make sure to get our people out of the more dangerous areas. They will get them out of Poland, take them across Europe to Italy and from there—to Palestine!

Where were they, my family? If only they were already in *Eretz Yisrael*, beyond reach.

If the last four had also been able to cross, only two would still be in any real danger—Ruth in Riga, and the illustrator in Moscow. Those two would give them leverage over us.

It was not to be believed ... Even if it turned out that they knew the whole truth—I would have to refuse to believe them, and play for time. But what if our people had not yet left Poland?

At the Moscow station, a new team awaited me. The five from the train handed me over to several fellows whose occupation was unmistakable. Their faces, their identical suits, their boots and their hats, the Emka car—"Emotchka," they called it: the operational vehicle of the Chekists, proved conclusively who they were. Agents of state security put me into their car and we glided through the streets of the capital. I did not see the city. The windows of the car were curtained and all I could see in front of me was the driver's broad back.

We stopped alongside a large building and my new guards took me inside. At the entrance they showed some kind of identification to the sentries and kept possession of it, and then they took me to an elevator and up to the fourth floor. We went by ordinary offices and finally went into a room where a clerk sat, immersed in doing some accounts. He showed no interest in us.

Nor did I seek any introductions. I sat down at an empty table, and waited.

Well then—Lubyanka: the number one political prison in the Soviet Union, headquarters of the state security services. I remembered that only a matter of weeks earlier, when I was going around with Chaim Sher in that area of central Moscow, we were joking that the solution to the housing problems in the capital might be solved if most of the residents were moved to that building ...

Now it wasn't funny.

Mulka had evidently been in a different carriage, or a different compartment in the carriage, with five guards of his own.

Someone came in and asked whether I wanted food; he suggested, as on the train, that he bring me a meal from the kiosk—at my expense. Like a hotel? I remembered that the Lubyanka building, before the revolution, originally housed a large insurance company—who had told me that?—and in the middle had been a hotel. Amusing? They brought me bread, an egg, tea ... a meal for a senior Soviet clerk in September, nineteen hundred and forty-six.

September? No, today was the first of October. They took care of me; they even brought me the newspaper, "*Izvestia*," to read. Right in front of my eyes—the sentences meted out to those tried at Nuremberg. Severe punishments: as they deserved! Were my "hosts" trying to frighten me?

A fellow came into the room and asked me to come with him. So, this was it ... off to a good start!

A two-room office: a large waiting room with a few cabinets and safes, and the actual office, also quite spacious—large windows, a sofa, chairs, a large desk and a small table, shelves and books.

The man sitting at the table was about 35 or 40, with a dark complexion. He greeted me and asked me to sit across from him. He asked my name. I responded, "Yaacov Fishman." He smiled. He meant my original name, he explained. I kept my composure and said, casually, that they had taken my documents from me. I

meant to imply that the documents would verify my name. No, he meant my “real name”—but I played dumb and insisted on Yaacov Michaelovich Fishman. The two of us conducted an amiable argument. The man continued smiling and even asked whether I had noticed the name written on the entry permit that my guard detail had left at the door. No, they had not shown me the entry permit; and anyway, if he was asking me my name, why did I not ask him his? When people want to get acquainted, then ... “What is your name?” He did not insist on anonymity, and told me his full name, quietly: Gregory Fyodorovich Shumlyakov.

Nice. He told me, right off. Maybe it was an omen. So Fishman would be Fishman. “Why did they arrest you?”

I answered that, in my opinion, I should be asking him that question, but I supposed that he was an OBKhSS man—in Baranovich they had told me that it was people from that office, which works to combat economic crimes, who had arrested me.

The man smiled again. I knew, of course, that I had insulted him, even hurt him by comparing him, an agent of internal state security, to a clerk or policeman who hunts down profiteers ...

Shumlyakov then queried: “You don’t want to talk?”

“That’s right. I don’t want to. In my humble opinion, it is actually you, or your people who arrested me, who should explain to me what they want from me.” I even muttered something about habeas corpus and my being a Polish citizen.

Hearing this, he burst out laughing. Even I could not help smiling, but I kept up the pretense.

“All right,” he said, “sit on the couch.” He sat down there, too, and thus we conversed comfortably about literature, films, music ...

“By the way, what is your opinion of the ballet ‘Esmeralda’ that you saw at the Bolshoi?” He was hinting, of course, that they had had me under surveillance and that he knew I had been there with the illustrator.

I ignored the significance that the interrogator would have attached to this information about a visit to the Bolshoi and began critiquing the music of the ballet, with my impressions of the performance.

He, too, had seen the ballet—and we discussed in total seriousness various details of its execution—in the best Russian tradition. Suddenly he stopped, and asked me if there was any point in playing hide and seek, but I rather liked this style of interrogation (postpone, postpone the inevitable confrontation, however briefly), and so I continued chattering. He apparently had had enough.

“I will question you more formally,” he said, going back to sit behind his desk again, and placing me in the chair opposite. Then he began hurling his questions rapidly:

“Your name, father’s name, and last name?”

“Yaacov Michaelovich Fishman.”

"Who is the man arrested with you?"

"My brother Pavel Michaelovich Fishman."

"Where are you from?"

"From Fergana, Uzbekistan."

"Where did you work in Fergana?"

"In a textile concern, as an accountant."

"Your address there?"

"Lenin Street, number 7."

"What is the factory manager's name?"

"Ivan Demitriyevich Borodulin."

"And your brother, what does he do, where does he live?"

"He served in the army in the Ural mountains. I used to write to him using his unit number."

"Where were you traveling to?"

"To Bialystok. In Poland."

"Where you were born?"

"In Bialystok."

"What street did you live on there, before the war?"

"Legyonerska, number 2."

"Who gave you and your brother your exit permits to Poland?"

"I have no idea. My brother took care of that."

Some further questions and answers—and he threw down the pencil he was holding and asked me: "Do you not think that we know that your name is Yankelevich?"

We sat on the couch again.

One could say that I had passed the first test—the technical one. But I did not delude myself. It was very easy to come up with fictitious answers and not get into trouble, so long as the questions were stereotypical ones, and the verbal sparring had been, thus far, really just an exercise to test how well I was in control of my nerves. My replies could not have endangered anyone. There is no Soviet city without a Lenin Street just as—evidently—there was no city in pre-war Poland without its Legyonerska Street ... He got involved with the factory in Fergana and its manager's name, all entirely nonexistent—all I had wanted was to make it tangential. I didn't get in too deep nor get him in too deep.

The interrogator realized that I was able to play the game and stonewall in my own way, but we both knew that it was still a game, and that he would be making the rules now. Thus, when he suggested that I tell him about my crimes, I immediately replied that I refused. The "friendly" atmosphere was ruined ... "Why?" he asked, with feigned innocence, and I replied simply that "I don't want to" without any explanations: "I don't want to talk about it." He kept on pushing: "Why don't you want to?" and I explained that I also did not want to explain

and that since I had no explanation, he, the interrogator, could choose whatever explanation he wished.

But no—the interrogator was not satisfied with my response, and demanded that I answer his questions, but I threw the ball back into his court again by saying that it's his job to explain to me why I was arrested, and if they are going to imprison me, he has to tell me what I am charged with ...

This irritated the interrogator—unless he was only pretending?—and he got to his feet and told me dismissively: “This is not the militia and it's not the high court of justice or the OBKhSS.” And after a short pause, speaking more emphatically and decisively, almost cheerfully, he said, “This is the ‘*Kontrazvedka*’—counterintelligence!”

Despite the force inherent in this name, I was not greatly moved by hearing it. My expression conveyed only a stupid “So what?” At this point, the interrogator called someone to take me back to the room where I had first been seated.

I was happy, even proud, of my first appearance, like a novice actor who has not forgotten his lines so carefully memorized. My nerves had not yet betrayed me, but I did not delude myself—somewhere in a room in the office that was handling me sat Lavrenti Pavlovich Beria—the hangman second only to Stalin—and the office already had a “splendid” history of breaking the strongest and most outstanding people.

Drag things out as far as possible—drag things out and kill time—to improve the prospects for the foursome to get out of danger.

Incarceration, strange as it may sound, lessened for me, inwardly—and evidently also for Mulka—the emotional stress that had been intensifying for the last six or seven weeks. The drama of evading our pursuers had finally ended—not as we had wished, of course—but anyway ended.

There was a strange sense of a new beginning, commencing an experience we had heard so much about while living always in its shadow. The *bricha* chapter was over. The irritating, ever-present fear of messing up and of messing someone else up—over and done with. The constant surveillance, a permanent feature of our lives that had been physically and mentally exhausting—was also finished now.

Was Mulka feeling this way, too?

They brought me lunch, and after that I was taken again to Shumlyakov. Another long and tiring effort to persuade me to open my mouth, while I resisted being drawn into a dialogue, requiring a sustained alertness and watchfulness so as not to fall into any of the traps he was setting for me with logic and deduction grounded in things I had said or refused to say.

Shumlyakov proposed that we engage in a joint thought experiment, to understand the logic behind my refusal to respond substantively: Did I think that they—that is, the authorities—did not know what we were engaged in? Did I

think I had been arrested in error? That it was all a mistake and if I did not confess to anything, they would release me? Conversely, if I said anything superfluous, that it would be used in evidence against me? Did I think that, if I said something wrong they would make me “walk barefoot over hot coals?”

What was that? A hint? And he went on listing all kinds of logical and illogical possibilities for my silence and asked me to respond, so that he could prove to me how unreasonable my behavior was.

He asked: “Are you afraid that you will be found to have said things here that are denied by your friend? Are you worrying about the welfare of the illustrator?” (I did my best to appear indifferent.) “Are you worried that something may be to the detriment of your family?”

When I heard this question, I was unable to refrain from smiling a little too disparagingly, and the interrogator immediately added in a more moderate tone and with less self-assurance, so typical of his behavior: “Ah, I understand, they are already outside the wall?”

He sounded disappointed! He had been sure that this card would be his winning ace. He also sounded a little angry (real, or feigned?) when he told me that here, in counter-espionage, I would be unable to bribe anyone, and none of my stratagems was going to work ... So why, really, shouldn't I talk? Why should I take on the added burden of silence, which in any case I would not be able to sustain? Was I worried that something might be leaked, from here? I could rest assured on that score, none of my friends knew—and they would never know—what I said and what I did not say ... Did I not consider that my interrogators had other sources and that they could do without my information? And a lot more of that nature.

It looked as though Shumlyakov knew in his heart of hearts that he was “talking to a wall,” that my ears were deaf to what he was saying. I raised my eyebrows when he added: “Here you won't be able to benefit by bribing anyone ...” That comment was a small victory for me. A smart man like him could not have suspected that I could believe that here, in this building, I would be able to bribe anyone (with what?). His saying so showed a failure to persuade me; his wanting to tease me indicated impotence. Bribery indeed!

“If you do not want to talk, I will have to turn you over to one of my interrogators,” commented Shumlyakov, picking up the phone and announcing resolutely: “Send a sentry and take this prisoner away ... to the Internal unit.”

His pitiable compensation for his failure!

In the basement, I experienced the process of turning a detainee into a robot. How many times did I answer the question: Father's name, family name? Or: Year of birth? Place of birth?

... The threads unraveled from my underwear and clothing, shoes taken for

examination by X-ray, orifices and creases checked by the interrogation team's doctor, disinfection and cleansing of my entire body in the shower, peering into the tiniest holes in every one of my teeth ...

Fingers: Every one, separately, on each hand in turn, and both hands together—dipped in black goo for a set of fingerprints—known in prisoners' slang as “strumming the piano”; all the buttons on my outer clothing and underwear, cut off; the mask-like faces under the dull electric light, repeating in mechanical voices the endless series of questions like a broken record, again and again ... The goods taken to storage after being precisely recorded, including my shoelaces.

And incarceration in the “box”—the box-like cell to which you are consigned, wearing the now-unrecognizable, tattered remains of the clothing that was all you had when you embarked on this journey ...

Four windowless walls, two paces by three; a bench against the wall, on which it is forbidden to lie down during the hours officially designated as daytime; the blinding light of a bulb burning night and day, which makes your eyes ache; and a small, round hatch in the heavy door.

Silence. Hours of silence. Only rarely you sense an eye peering at you through the hatch. Felt—not seen. Glasses confiscated.

Three times a day, the prisoner is fed in his cell.

Quiet. The floor in the corridors is carpeted. The sentries wear padded boots. There is no talking—only whispers, and hints. Sounds from the outside do not reach your ears. Everything is allied. Against you.

Another day, another night.

What time is it?

But what good will it do me to know the time, and whether it is night or day?

The door to the box opens. Whispering, the guard calls me to come out to the corridor; whispering, asks me my name, my father's name and my family name; pats me down superficially, since he knows that the guards who put me in the cell earlier already checked me carefully. Then he grasps my arms and pulls me closer to him, lest I overcome him and run away—where to?—and walks me in silence down the corridor. I cannot see very well without my glasses. We march along the corridors, pass through a wire-mesh divider, where my name is recorded, and enter a different corridor. Again we march, my arm firmly in the grip of the guard. We stop alongside a door marked 564-A. The guard knocks, goes in with me and announces my arrival, gives my documents to the officer sitting behind the desk, and leaves.

The officer asks me to sit on the chair next to a small table, and introduces himself as “Podpolkovnik [Lieutenant Colonel] Ivan Yeliseyevich Pavlov.” He then explains to me that I must address him as “Citizen Interrogator.” So be it. I agree not to view him as a “comrade.”

For the next two months, I was Pavlov's at night, sometimes also during the day-time.

... During that first visit, daytime arrived. A ray of sunlight penetrating the screened window managed to soften even the official-looking furniture and the safe. After my sojourn in "the box," I had learned to appreciate the atmosphere in an interrogator's office. Not for long.

Pavlov expressed his hope that we could "work together."

I was invited to get to work ...

The routine of my days at Lubyanka—after I was moved to an ordinary cell—began at night. At ten o'clock, there was a signal for all the inmates to turn their electric light bulb off and on, three times in succession—which required them to stand on their beds. Thus began a game which did not amuse me at all—you get undressed, lie down in the bed, cover yourself with the blanket, take your arms out from under it and lay them on top, so that the guard can see them from the hatch in the cell door. After ten or fifteen minutes, when you have fallen asleep or are drowsing, the door opens, the guard asks your name and, as you identify yourself, orders you to get dressed. He takes you out of your cell. His colleague is standing there, the one you call *Shmon* (Tubby), and he takes you, his arm linked in yours, from the fourth floor of the prison through a passage to the building housing government offices. In the passageway sits a woman holding the "Iron Book"—a book that has an iron plate covering all the names recorded in it except yours, which peeks out from a slit in the iron plate, and alongside it there is the date and the time. From there the way leads on through long corridors and via an elevator to the required floor, and on to the office of "Citizen Interrogator" Pavlov. The guard leaves after receiving a signature from the interrogator and you receive permission to sit down.

Seated at the small table, you rest your hand on your knee, and if you refuse to answer the interrogator's questions, you will continue to sit in that same position until five-thirty or quarter to six, when you will be returned to your cell, and after the guard searches your things, you will be ordered to lie on the bed. After a few minutes, the light will go out, signaling everyone to get out of bed. So begins a new day in prison, during which, if you are not summoned to another interrogation session, you will remain awake and your cellmate will try to help you overcome your fatigue, because if you close your eyes or hide them from the guard when he comes back to look through the hatch, the door will open and you will be ordered to sit or stand across from the hatch. At ten o'clock at night, you will undergo the same interrogation exercise again—and so forth, over and over again ...

All the signs indicate that this was Mulka's lot, as well. In any event, I was aware that there had been nothing in Pavlov's questions, questions I refused to answer,

that could be construed as information he received from Mulka.

Not that I was refusing to speak at all. I had not said that I was on strike and wouldn't talk. I was fine discussing "general matters" that were not germane to the matter at hand—the way people lived in Latvia before the Soviet annexation, the particulars of my biography, in which there was nothing to harm me or my comrades, and worldly affairs like literature, music, cinema, lifestyle, humor ... But whenever I was asked a question of relevance to the field of activity that had brought me to Lubyanka, I responded with "I refuse to answer that question" or "On that subject I refuse to speak."

Pavlov tested me with "alertness exercises": While engaged in casual conversation, he would suddenly shoot a real question at me, which I would answer with a smile and a shake of the head to signify "no."

I did not complain of being tired. I knew what his response would be. The day—that is, the night—would come when I would collapse. I might fall off the chair, or have a heart attack.

Apparently Mulka was undergoing a similar exercise.

Pavlov threatened, joked around, tried the "hot" and "cold" approach; he told me of how he had interrogated, while they sat in this same room on that same chair, detainees stronger and more important than me, and how he had "broken" them. While thus conversing he would revert innumerable times to the same question, such as: "What does the word '*bricha*' mean?" I, long since revolted by that ugly term which had stuck to something so splendid, I would reply decisively to the philological question, saying that there was no such word in Hebrew; perhaps there had been an error? Perhaps he meant "*brachah*" [blessing] or "*breychah*" [pool]? At that point I would volunteer a long lecture on our father Yaacov's blessing for his children, and on the famous poem by our national poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik ... since Pavlov apparently had doubts about my command of the Hebrew language. Evidently I did not convince him.

Had I know where the four travelers were, I might have moderated my resistance ...

And maybe not.

The days became worse than the nights. Despite their efforts to help me, my cellmates could not do much for me. I wanted only one thing, which they could not give me—to sleep, to sleep, to sleep ...

But with nightfall, my preparedness was amplified in anticipation of the trouble that Pavlov could get me into, and this helped me to endure.

For how long?

My responses occasionally irritated Pavlov, who generally behaved with surprising restraint. Sometimes he invited a colleague into the room, to join forces in an effort to get the better of me.

"Do you know someone named Yaffe?"

"No, I don't."

"What is the name of the man who was with you at Baranovich?"

"The one calling himself Pavel Michaelovich Fishman."

"Do you know his real name?"

"It is known."

"Kindly state his real name."

"I refuse to answer that question."

"Is it Samuel Lazarovich Yaffe?"

"I did not say so."

"Then what is his name?"

"I refuse to confirm."

And so forth ... It was apparent that Mulka had already given his name, and of course they had other means of discovering and confirming his identity; but I, on principle, refused to give them any useful information whatever, because I believed that one violation precipitates another ... I felt that, unless I managed to be as thick-skinned as an elephant, I would end up capitulating.

The truth is, I was longing to confirm Mulka's real name so that they would let me alone. But that would have signified, both to me and to my interrogator, surrender. So, I did not ...

On one occasion, my behavior provoked one of Pavlov's entourage and he burst out: "If I were your interrogator, you would have been weeping tears of blood for responding that way!" But Pavlov made as if to calm his impassioned colleague ...

Evidently they had been ordered not to rely on physical violence. How much time did I have until their patience ran out?

Interesting: I never heard any of my interrogators say anything that I could have interpreted as anti-Semitism. It was clear to them that the cause motivating us was a moral one, at least—and here in prison, motivating us to sever ourselves from the interrogation. I supposed that all the members of my and of Mulka's interrogation team had received an explicit instruction in this regard, and if so, we were lucky, because in another two years—in 1948 and thereafter—they would have reminded us of all our sins going back to our forefather Abraham.

The "shock" caused by my behavior was a recurring theme raised by these seasoned players. This was evidently an old standby in their script.

In my cell on the third floor of the Lubyanka building, I had three cellmates. Of two of them—my Ukrainian neighbor and a young Jewish guy brought there from a camp for additional interrogation—I have almost no recollection, but one is thoroughly engraved in my memory. This was Colonel Grigoryev, whose ancestors had been Cantonists, and who defined himself as Jewish and who was, for me, a bulwark, a counselor and an adviser. I told him of the circumstances of

our arrest—mine and my “brother’s”—and revealed the secret of the high-quality documents we had in our possession, our intentions to get to Poland, and a word to the wise.

A prisoner who resists the interrogation tells little to his cellmates of the things that are spoken of with his interrogators, although my tales of things known anyway to my interrogators, with the caveat that I was not cooperating with them, clarified for Grigoryev who I was and why I had been arrested. He whispered his encouragement, but was also afraid, and concerned that I would not be able to remain silent for too long.

Gradually, I learned about life in prison. The wardens, the doctors, the duty officer and the clerks behaved like robots—they did not engage you in conversation and tried to minimize their replies to your questions, relying mainly on “no.” There was actually almost no contact with staff. Any request by a prisoner that deviated from routine was routed to an interrogator for his consideration and a decision, and provided him with leverage in his ongoing struggle with that prisoner. For that reason, I asked for nothing. I adhered to the lovely rule for any prisoner under coercion: “Do not need the interrogators.”

At the time of my arrest, I had a few hundred cigarettes in my possession—a gift for our friends in Poland. The cigarettes were confiscated and the interrogator assumed that I was a smoker. His obvious disappointment was considerable when he offered me a cigarette (mine) but I refused to take it. He even tried to persuade me to smoke. My consistent refusal, which neutralized another means of pressuring me—by giving me a cigarette or refusing a request on my part to smoke—clearly frustrated him.

In Lubyanka there was an excessively large library, most of the contents of which had been confiscated, apparently, from the homes of prisoners who had “disappeared” in years past, especially around 1937/38; there were works by the best Russian authors (with only a few exceptions, including Dostoevsky) along with translations of the best of world literature. Once a week or once every ten days, they would bring books for whoever was interested. The problem was that my eyeglasses had been confiscated, and my eyes were so reddened and teary from lack of sleep that I could not read. To pass the time, I would pace back and forth until I was tired, sit and rest and then pace some more while conversing with my cellmates.

Pavlov became more aggressive, and I got a taste of solitary confinement—an utterly dark cell in the basement, in which it was possible to sit down only with difficulty, on a small wooden shelf that protruded from the wall; it was pitch-black there during the daytime, too, one’s hands and knees touched the wall or the door, the food ration was two hundred grams of bread per day, and water; plus, every three days, soup. When I returned from there my cellmates would feed me secretly from their own mouths.

Twice, at midnight, Colonel Zimenkov, head of the investigations unit of the Fourth Main Division, joined Pavlov to assist with my interrogation. He sat near me and proved to me beyond any doubt that they “knew who I was.”

“Do you doubt that we know everything?”

“No, I believe you when you say so.”

“So why are you being stubborn?”

“That is my right. But if you know everything, why are you wasting your time? I can’t fathom that.”

“We want to test your frankness.”

“I am declaring to you openly that I am not frank. And if my lack of frankness means I must be punished, it is your right to punish me and to add this punishment to all the others ...”

“Are you a religious zealot, perhaps?”

“No, I am not.”

They claimed to be seeking repentance (Spain ... the Inquisition ...), meaning that I should reveal all the sins I had committed.

Pavlov would repeatedly take out of his pocket a mirror and place it so that I would see my face. “Look, Yasha,” he would say in a friendly tone, “look how you have deteriorated! Why are you torturing yourself?”

One night Pavlov announced that he had an order of imprisonment—after I had been kidding around and claiming, during one of the sessions, that since there is no order of imprisonment against me, I am free, by law, and it is forbidden to interrogate me.

The order was signed by Minister for State Security Abakumov and State Prosecutor-General Gorshenin. What an honor; what an honor—that the highest echelons had taken such trouble on my behalf! I expressed my amazement that the minister was Abakumov and not Merkulov since, insofar as I had known, Merkulov was the incumbent in that position. The interrogator’s face showed a slight embarrassment. He answered that the position was now held by Abakumov—and I understood that his predecessor had been thrown out only a short time ago and, who knows, he might be imprisoned in the same cell block as mine. When I voiced this conjecture aloud, Pavlov looked even more embarrassed; I could have predicted for him then that Abakumov would be executed, which in fact he was, about seven years later ...

In the course of my interrogation, they also used the “illustrator weapon”. They had no difficulty assuming that this would give them some leverage over me, despite my outward show of complete indifference as to her fate. Because they pressed me—and Zimenkov was outstanding at this, sparing no tantalizing and boorish hints to shock me—and because our first encounter at the Red Poppy Café had, ostensibly, become the focus of the investigation into this subject, I realized that Betty knew nothing of what I had agreed with the illustrator concern-

ing a joint version of our first—ostensibly chance—meeting at the café; Betty told the interrogators what had really happened, that is, that she had brought me to the illustrator, and because each of them had told a different story, my attempt to “extricate” Betty from the investigation only made things worse for both of them, and was liable to lead to the illustrator’s imprisonment for having lied.

When the interrogators reiterated their questions about the circumstances of our acquaintance, I told Zimenkov that she, the illustrator, was lying because I had asked her to do it, and was simply parroting the version I had given her to speak; the truth is that Betty, whom I have known since childhood when we studied piano with the same teacher, is the one who had brought me to the illustrator, and that the illustrator was sticking to this baseless story only because I had asked her to do that. This explanation satisfied the interrogators and they left off questioning me about the matter.

The interrogators often repeated the refrain that they were not asking me to libel myself; they only want the truth. However absurdly, the overuse of this phrase “We are not asking you to libel yourself, just tell the truth” seemed to suggest that principle does not really guide the interrogators’ actions much.

One night Pavlov told me that I had been accused under Article 58 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Republic, subparagraph 1, section A, and also under Article 58, subparagraph 10, second part, and also under Article 58, subparagraph 11. What this meant was that I was accused of treason against the motherland, anti-Soviet propaganda under aggravated circumstances, and conspiracy. If I was found guilty—the maximum punishment would be death by firing squad. Pavlov did not leave it at that, but elucidated that henceforth I could no longer argue that they were failing to honor the principle of habeas corpus, and I agreed that the wheels of their justice turn exceedingly slow, but they turn.

The nights went by slowly. Again and again I felt that I was near the limits of my ability to cope with the lack of sleep. There were times when I sought to lose consciousness just so that they would let me fall asleep. The attitude toward me became harsher, and the affectation of courtesy disappeared, too. But they did not beat me. The interrogators were tired, too, although they regained their strength during the day.

One night, maybe about three o’clock, the phone on Pavlov’s desk rang. He talked a long time; fairly often he initiates these calls, and often talks about what he does on his time off or what he and his friends like to eat, maybe to make me jealous. This time, after responding to the caller, he ordered me to get up and he took me to another floor, where we went into a room where some officers were sitting. The officers indicated that he should go into a small room where, next to the telephone, a lieutenant was sitting. Pavlov sat with me on a sofa next to a large wall cupboard. We sat down in silence. After a short conversation on the

telephone, the lieutenant signaled to Pavlov, who rose and instructed me to come with him. He opened the door of the large cupboard and we went in and found ourselves in an expansive room, at the other end of which, next to a large desk cluttered with colored telephones, sat a bespectacled general, intelligent looking, with a great many decorations adorning the lapels of his jacket. Among them I saw the symbol of the Supreme Soviet.

Pavlov sat to one side, almost reverently.

The general introduced himself as Pitovranov, Head of the Fourth Department of the Ministry for State Security—the department in charge of border security. He indicated a chair in front of him and instructed me to sit down. He then picked up a dossier—it was the dossier of my interrogation—and turned to me.

“For some weeks now,” he explained quietly, “the interrogation has been proceeding, but not progressing. Aside from some basic biographical information, you refuse to speak to the issue at hand. Among the twenty or thirty questions you have been asked, I find here replies to only two or three, mainly biographical. These responses do not advance the investigation. This is an outrage, and the matter has come to the attention of the minister himself.”

“The law does not require me to speak,” I replied. “The interrogator must clarify for me what I am accused of, enumerate the articles of the charge, and then, if I have anything to add or subtract, I will do so.”

I emphasized that my argument was not arbitrary. It complied with the law. I refused to argue with him about my right to remain silent, and I even told him so.

Pitovranov rose and went past me behind his desk, took a chair and sat across from me. He now steered the conversation in an ideological direction, explaining to me that the situation of the Jews in the Soviet Union was reasonable, and he even mentioned a few names of Jews who had made a contribution to Soviet science or music, and then went on the offensive, although his tone remained courteous.

“You people, the remnant of Jews from the Baltic states, whom we would not miss if you got out of here, are annoying decent Soviet people and inciting them to serious crimes against the motherland.” He then added that he knows what is going on “with you people abroad”; if he meant Poland or Italy, he did not say.

Because I was silent, he advised me to “defend my views.” His intent, of course, was to drag me into a conversation.

I replied that I refused to argue with him.

“Why?”

“For two reasons. Because you are the interrogator and I, the interrogated; if we should meet as equals over a cup of coffee, in a café in Switzerland, say, I will be glad to argue with you there. Second, because everything you can say is already known to me and does not interest me; on the other hand, I fear that ev-

everything I could say on this subject that you, General Pitovranov, are interested in hearing, you will not understand in any case.”

Pitovranov did not seem moved by my impolite refusal to respond to his suggestion, and said either in warning or to belittle me: “I think that we have treated you too liberally.” He then turned to Pavlov and said: “I am giving him time to think things over, until five o’clock tomorrow. If by then he is unwilling to speak or write for us, transfer him to Lefortovo.” That night, he added, they should let me sleep ...

That night I sank into sleep like a stone into the depths of the ocean.

Grigoryev, to whom I related the events of that night, was sad to say goodbye. He pressed my hand and wished me “much strength.” His eyes said that he did not think I would be able to hang on—and I knew that he was right, although time was on my side—something Grigoryev did not know.

The names of our four friends on the journey to Brest, I did not mention to him.

Nor did Mulka.

The next day I was moved to Lefortovo.

The general disappointed me.

In a subsequent meeting with me, he was less cordial, and warned that he would stand me up in front of my friends and declare that I had been stealing from public funds ...

I was astonished at this foolishness, the more so as he added: “We know how much money you put into your own pocket.” (Maybe this was his image of “the Jew”?)

I told him that I understood his concern—but that it was not Soviet state funds that I had been spending. What was he talking about?

He replied that my friends would “repudiate” me. I shrugged indifferently, and then he brought out his heavy ordnance:

“We will bring your friends from there—from Poland, from Italy! We will stand them in front of you! They will repudiate you ...”

“Even if you bring my mother, I don’t care ...”

Pavlov shrank away in his corner.

Was this the same General Pitovranov who, much later, in the 1950s, would be the coordinator of Soviet intelligence in Europe, while based in the Soviet embassy in Pankow, in East Germany—bearing the modest title of Secretary? Was this the General Pitovranov who had survived all the purges and ended his service as chairman of the Soviet Bureau of Foreign Trade and overseer of Soviet economic espionage?

It would be appropriate if we met for a third time over a cup of coffee in Switzerland, since I owe him an explanation—the smartest spy in Soviet intelligence, according to Western intelligence experts

...

Permit me to disagree with you, Western intelligence experts ...

This time, incidentally, I'll pay for the coffee—even if my comrades repudiate me for spending the money.

During one of my first interrogation sessions, after I refused to speak, Pavlov had taken away my eyeglasses and did not return them—as punishment for my silence. In the interim, he had given them back to me only to read the transcript at the end of every session, because I had refused to sign them unless I could read them; I was fussy about every letter and phrase recorded and I taught him to treat the product he was producing with the same seriousness that a jurist would give to a document. When he scrambled a word or tried to phrase things ambiguously, or to use the sort of Orwellian language they favored in his party, I would give him back the transcript, saying: “That is not how I answered”—and I would oblige him to rewrite it. He found this unpleasant, but he always did it. Sometimes I would catch him out in a spelling mistake, and when I corrected his scrambled Russian he would restrain himself, like an errant pupil.

In Lefortovo, too, they took away my glasses; maybe they were afraid that, in my isolation, I might want to cut my wrists with the glass from the lenses. The right to shed blood was reserved for the authorities. But even after they had taken my glasses away, the guards would peek at me continually through the hatch.

Life in Lefortovo would have been bearable had they not prevented me from sleeping—they let me sleep one night a week, and sometimes not even that. The interrogations—still by Pavlov, even in the new jail—with the wrangling between the two of us, sometimes approaching a kind of entertainment, and with the long silences between us, during which he would make as if to read something, to eat his fill, or to talk at length on the telephone with comrades, who were also bored—all this tired him, too. Often, to get some rest, he would act furious about my not answering some routine question he had put to me, and would order me to turn my chair and my face to the wall—and he would nap briefly in his chair. I would stay awake, lest I fall out of my own chair, but at least I could close my eyes. A real luxury!

Pavlov would come to me at Lefortovo at ten o'clock at night, after I had gotten undressed and retired to bed. Then his emissary would come and take me to a large, very cold room, where the interrogator sat in his winter-weight military jacket while I wore just a thin shirt. Sometimes they would bring me to him at

Lubyanka, and then I would undergo five or six body checks in the nighttime cold—often requiring me to undress completely, and as a bonus, they would look into all my orifices. When I left Lefortovo, the guard there would check to make sure I had not smuggled out anything forbidden (like what?); the Lubyanka guard would put me into a dark cell in a vehicle bearing the word BREAD or MEAT on it, internally divided into small cells for single prisoners; at the entrance to Lubyanka, the wardens would repeat the meticulous body search and put me into the “box,” and from there I would be called to Pavlov. After I had spent the entire night being crushed by Pavlov, the guard would take me out and check whether I had somehow lifted something from the interrogator’s room, and then the detail from the Bread or Meat van would undress me and check me, and when I got “home,” to Lefortovo, the guards there would check me with ostentatious care, which included my being completely undressed and having them look into my every orifice again, plus the command to “lift your organ”; and then, to my cell, sometimes after a cursory check right at the doorway.

Standing on a concrete floor in Moscow, in November and December, dressed as Adam was before he had tasted the forbidden fruit, holding in one’s hand a fig leaf in the form of underpants and undershirt, while one’s jailors are going about their business in a leisurely way, was not encouraging to the gaunt body of a prisoner. This descendant of Adam and Eve would hop up and down in his nakedness and try to warm himself by clutching his socks and underwear and the other articles of clothing, while praying inwardly that this evil regime should pass from the face of the earth quickly and in our time, and meanwhile—that the session would end and they would finally put him back into storage in cell number eight.

On the evening of November the 7th, the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, when I was taken to Pavlov, I found him in a festive mood. I thought that he, too, might be happy at the possibility of sleeping tonight in his own bed after imbibing in honor of the holiday. Pavlov began unburdening himself to me, saying that he believes that I, after all, am a “Soviet man” and that now, with an opportunity for some self-criticism, I will come back after this revolutionary holiday prepared to repent ...

What has come over him?

Even more surprising, Pavlov then asked whether I have any wishes that he can fulfill. The Messiah has come! My heart melted. I was tempted, like a baby offered a lollipop, and I told him that if the illustrator was in prison, maybe they would permit me to transfer the money they are holding for me at the prison to her daughter ...

Pavlov was transformed instantly into the faithful guard dog of the Bolshevik revolution. His face assumed a professional expression and his slightly hoarse voice responded that, if the illustrator is at home, I have no need to worry about

her daughter, and if she is in prison—the Ministry of the Interior will take care of the child and put her into an institution for children ...

I deserved it, that time. Score one for Pavlov.

My strength was running out. My feet were swollen. Putting on my shoes was accomplished very slowly. My eyes leaked tears for no reason. I was no longer able to read a book. My breathing was labored. My head felt like it would split open. The brief outing in the Lefortovo prison yard did nothing to improve my declining health; on each such round, I would count the few minutes allotted to it in the hope that now they would order me back to my cell. The daily exercise was not obligatory—I could have declined it—but that’s what I wanted. Once I even got sophisticated and took off my underwear before going out to the yard, despite the watcher at the hatch—I was hoping to catch a chill and get pneumonia, so that I would be hospitalized. All in vain; I didn’t even get a cold. The little pleasure I got was like “the enemy is just beyond that hill”—Pavlov, too, was about to collapse. But I knew that Zimenkov would just replace him with someone else. Him; not me.

A few months later, I asked an interrogator who had appeared in Pavlov’s stead, “Where is my friend?” Too pleased at his comrade’s misfortune to resist, he told me, “He is having a rest at a hostel, to recuperate ... from you.”

One night, after Pavlov’s return, he revisited all his “cold” and “hot” exercises and announced that his hand would not tremble when he flayed the skin off me, and that I shouldn’t think that I am an important criminal—the maximum sentence for those who repent is five years, on probation, even; and moreover more important criminals than I had sat on this chair and had subsequently reached greatness, thanks to the magnanimity of the Soviet state.

Later, Pavlov informed me indirectly that Mulka still maintained his silence.

That same night, though, Pavlov had come to the interrogation armed with Mulka’s dossier, to prove to me that “only you are playing the hero, but your friend has already come to his senses. There’s no point in being stubborn. The facts are known to us, in any case.”

We were sitting next to one another. Pavlov opened the dossier on a page marked in advance, and advised me to take a look.

A terrible feeling welled up inside me. I was unwilling to believe that Mulka had broken.

I looked through the transcript and read the section indicated; supposedly Mulka had told his interrogator that, on September 27, he was waiting for me in the morning at the Baranovich train station.

That was it?! That was the card Pavlov was holding? What a card!

Now, almost two months after we were detained, all that this idiot can show me as proof that they have “broken” Mulka is something they knew anyway and

which there was no reason to hide? They have extracted from Mulka nothing more substantial than that, to convince me that he has really talked.

Give me a break, Pavlov!

The interrogator fixed me with a triumphant look and tried to persuade me. This merely encouraged me to hold firm and I said so.

The nightly routine of breaking me down continued as before.

How to be rescued from this? The names of the four who had gone to Brest were not mentioned during the interrogation, but who knows, perhaps they too were in a cell somewhere in Lubyanka-Lefortovo, or were wandering around somewhere in Lithuania looking for an escape route to Poland?

I looked for some formula that would save me from silence without harming anyone. Who is the one? The illustrator, evidently ... A woman! The relationship that developed between us was known to them. I could not change that. That she went on my errand to the bureau of attorneys enabled them to bring the full weight of the law to bear on her. As for Ruth, the situation was even more complicated—I have no idea what Mulka had said or had not said on this subject, what Ruth claimed or what she was continuing to claim ... If I persevered with regard to Ruth and refused to provide details, it might lead them to suspect that there is something there ... So I came to the conclusion that I should tell the truth, even if it led to her arrest ...

What? How had such a thought snuck into my head? Look at that—I had caved in even before opening my mouth. I would have to find a way to remain silent once and for all, because if this sort of thought was running through my mind, it meant I'd been broken, in fact. I would have to shut myself up before they came to take me for the nightly session ... I looked through my things and remembered that I had a silk nightshirt—I could hang myself if they weren't watching me through the hatch ...

There was no choice. I must go on refusing to speak. One more night, and then another. Pavlov was keeping track. He knew that I wouldn't be able to hang on ... He knew that I was already broken ... undoubtedly, based on his experience ...

The effort to mentally recreate Beethoven's 32 Variations for piano failed after the fourth one. But I did not start over and try again. I was exhausted.

It was not hard to figure out that, during the seven or eight weeks that had passed since my arrest, the investigators would have been able to find out a great many things in detail about our methods of moving people to Poland. I could tell, by the questions I was asked, what and how much the interrogators knew. They already had a solid case against us, and it was this that stopped me from worrying. Whatever was going to happen would happen.

Merely having been caught with forged papers in our possession was enough, in and of itself, to earn us a severe sentence. In Karpov's office in Baranovich—even

if he himself managed to flee, and escape imprisonment—they would have been able to check, and to find out that he had issued for us many exit permits with no foundation in reality. And it was a reasonable assumption that Ilka Zaiden and his comrades in prison were likely—if they thought we had already crossed the border—to “dump” on us whatever was convenient for them, especially since their interrogators could have told them that we were already across the border ...

Both Pavlov and Zimenkov boasted to me that they knew a lot about our misdeeds. So then what was the point of continuing the investigation? They wanted (they said) confession and remorse; repentance (shades of the Spanish Inquisition ...). This tactic was so transparent that I thought they should be embarrassed to have to resort to such cheap tricks.

At that point I did not know that Riga prisoners Ilka and Herman were being interrogated in Moscow. This became known to me only at the end of my own interrogation.

On the 19th of October—three weeks after our arrest—in Riga, in the greatest secrecy, Ilka Zaiden and his comrades were put on trial. Four months previously, arrested along with Ilka were *Betar* activists Herman Gurevich, Gika Herzenberg and Abba-Yitzhak (Itcha) Lifshitz. I did not know exactly what happened there; I relied on Ilka who had stayed in touch with one of the main *Betar* people in Riga, but I had not managed to get a detailed report from him before my arrest.

Ilka had sent one Betarnik to Vilna, Eli Blankenfeld, who apparently had had trouble with the authorities over a criminal matter. I sent him on to Poland at the first opportunity. It seems that in that same *Betar* group there was someone else who had been in similar trouble, and who, in exchange for his release, became a provocateur and turned in all of his comrades to the security services. He may have been a provocateur from the outset.

A few days before the trial, Ilka was brought to see an investigator with the rank of general. This man explained that, since Ilka had family in Riga—a mother and a sister—they would be “understanding” with him and would permit him to serve his sentence near Riga if he would disclose the names of the members of his criminal group still at large ... Possibly the provocateur had heard something about our activities in Vilna and had reported us, or maybe the local security people had worked out by themselves that behind the group of Riga Jews they had arrested there was someone more important? Or maybe Moscow had gotten involved with the Riga situation after Brauda was hired to represent the defendants there? In any event, the authorities had decided to conduct a thorough investigation of the affair of Zaiden et al.

During the investigation, Ilka had trouble assessing the degree to which the authorities were aware that a branch of a larger organization had fallen into their

hands. The general who had been given the task of broadening the investigation, whom Ilka had never seen before, tried to get him to talk. Ilka shrugged and answered that he had already told everything he knew.

He was not interrogated further in Riga.

Ilka was very surprised when he learned that he was to have a famous advocate of Brauda's stature. Brauda met with him shortly before the trial was to open and brought him my regards. Ilka's spirits soared—friends were watching out for him ... At the trial itself, Brauda reprised the "Vilna maneuver"—which he had used successfully in the trial of the defendants in the vehicle convoy affair. He argued that the defendants had not "betrayed the motherland"; all they had done was "attempt to cross the border without the appropriate documents." The sentence—in Soviet terms—was light. Ilka Zaiden and Herman Gurvich were sentenced to five years apiece. Gika Herzenberg got three years. Abba-Yitzhak Lifshitz—surprise, surprise!—was released on probation.

Brauda advised Ilka to appeal to a higher court, and promised to help.

Ilka and Herman stayed in the Riga prison for a long time—unusual for prisoners already sentenced; Ilka even began to feel bitter that they were not transferring him to a camp—where, as a disabled war veteran with one arm that did not function properly, he had a reasonable prospect of not being sent to hard labor, and might even be employed in his own field as a civil engineering technician in construction, or doing office work. In a camp, they are always building—if not huts, then solitary cells.

During the first half of November, the two—Ilka and Herman—were each taken, separately, out of Riga, but instead of taking them to a camp, they were brought to Lubyanka. From there—a short time later—they were transferred to Lefortovo Prison. Their case was joined to ours. For some time, neither Mulka nor I knew that we were now all ensnared in the same net.

Incidentally, we were not personally acquainted with our new comrade, Herman.

Ilka's interrogation acquired a different and more severe character. Now they were talking about Article 58.

Over time, our case was expanded to include Eliyahu Kroll—the man who had worked in the Vilna police headquarters and had helped Mulka get an identity document in the name of Pinchas Dembovsky—and he, too, was brought to Lubyanka.

From the standpoint of those responsible for the investigation, this was a real achievement—a group of five criminals with a demonstrable relationship to one another. Of course to capture five people in the context of an underground activity involving hundreds of people in various cities around the country was not much of a catch, yet it was some consolation for the failures of the state security office and its branches in Vilna and Riga.

Now our interrogators could reassure the senior ministerial echelons that the network had been revealed in its entirety, and foiled.

One more day; one more night. This is not interrogation. This is just more noise along the lines of “Why are you not talking?” “Why do you not tell us the truth?” And as I stuck to my usual reply—that I am not obliged to respond, and that if the investigating authority has proven that I really did intend to cross the border unlawfully, they could put me on trial.

I knew, of course, about the existence of the famous “Troika,” the committee of three whose members were all from the security services, and who decided the fate of the accused in secret and in absentia; but I had heard that this entity generally dealt with political prisoners. In our case, the authorities had a solid legal basis for putting us on trial (as if the judges in the Soviet Union were free to judge according to their conscience and not as per the instructions of the various internal security arms), and to prove our guilt as traitors to the motherland in light of the forged documents that Karpov had supplied to us.

Another long day in my cell, even more monotonous than the night, half of which I passed with Pavlov. At 10 o'clock at night, just as the light begins to blink to signal that the day has reached its end, I undress and collapse on the bed. Not even a few minutes have passed and the guard comes into our cell and tells me I must get dressed. Five minutes later, he opens the cell door and takes me out into the corridor. He grasps my arm and we walk. At the intersection of two corridors, a guard is waiting with two small flags. The guard accompanying me knows by their color whether the way ahead is clear, meaning, that no other prisoner is moving toward me at the same time who might, heaven forbid, bump into me in the corridor. We pass the intersection and descend to the basement.

The guard puts me into a room in which I have never been before. The room is barely lit. Without my glasses, which were confiscated, I can hardly distinguish an elongated table and behind it an entourage in uniform. They seat me in a chair. There is a tense silence. Behind the table, next to the fat Zimenkov and the gaunt Pavlov I can see the muscular Rublyov—who was Mulka's interrogator—and other officers flanked by powerful guards. There can be no mistake about what they are meant to do, given the order.

... They decided that tonight, they will get me to talk. For two weeks they have been threatening me: “We will end this elegant farce,” “We have broken more important people,” “We've had enough of playing it liberal ... ”

Fear courses through my body. It starts in my abdomen. My stomach heaves. I can see myself thrown onto the table—and the waiting thugs starting to pound me, all at once. All of them.

All my emotional preparation was as if it had never been. This is the end. In a little while, I'll start babbling. Screaming ...

Hold on, hold on, wait and be sure of what they are going to do, and how. I must not get confused by the performance. They will have to ask me about things. Tell me something. And they will say: "Now look—you see that we can substantiate what we said. We warned you."

Zimenkov began, and the others joined in, shouting and threatening me. Rublyov was like the groom at a wedding and Pavlov, too, chimed in hoarsely, demanding that I talk, tell everything, reveal the truth. Otherwise ...

I thought of the "righteous man of Sodom" and the night I hid in his library after escaping from the train, and read about the Spanish Inquisition. Now it was happening to me ... as it had happened to them, with the pyre nearby ... And inwardly I had always known that this moment was bound to come ...

Fear.

Fear that is hard to explain. Fear that spreads out from the gut and into every paralyzed limb of your body. Fear that I cannot possibly withstand—soon everything will fall apart, the stroke that will shatter my heart, the brain that can no longer bear the burden will simply melt ... the noise, the shouting ...

This is the test: All the wisecracks won't be worth a single cent, given one blow to the jaw, one kick in the testicles. Now they will prove to me that they were right, that they can squeeze out of me everything that happened and even what did not happen. I will name names ...

Strengthen me this time ...

I open my mouth and join the chorus. I shout, I scream, I tremble all over, I hear—just barely—my own voice: "You will not bring the people back! Whom are you trying to frighten? Me? It won't work! You're too late! You can't bring the people back! You can't! You can't! This is nineteen-forty-six! It's not like it was in nineteen-forty! Friends of mine went through the Gestapo and they didn't come back ... You want to frighten me? Me? You cannot! It won't happen! You're too late! The Jew of nineteen-forty-six is a different Jew ..."

Where did this "different Jew" come from? Where did I hear that very apt term? It's not mine. Ah yes, the students from Kiev—in Tashkent ... from our "collection of wisdom" ...

I know that this is an embarrassing performance, a cheap melodrama. In front of what audience am I playing? For whom? Can they understand it? What is our suffering to them? They know how to beat people up, and that's it. To whom am I preaching? It's embarrassing ...

My fear, it's my fear that is putting on this performance. The fear that rises in my throat and bursts out ... with these superficial words ...

I feel a choking. Waves of emotion buffet me. Now I'm wrung out and shrunk, seeing the glazed look of these bullies who await the order ...

Gradually the room becomes quiet. Absolutely silent. I manage to control my breathing.

Zimenkov whispers something to the guard, who grasps my arms tightly and removes me from the room, walks me upstairs, to my refuge, my cell on the first floor. Here is number eight ...

The corridor is silent. Nighttime. With a mighty effort, I manage to undress. To bed! My body is still trembling ... I am unable to fall asleep.

It's over. The whole night now belongs to me. I will sleep.

There were three things, evidently, that worked together to save me from physical torture.

I say "evidently" because I am only assuming. Nothing was even hinted at, to me. And I did not ask, of course.

First, apparently our Lubyanka-Lefortovo period coincided with a period of a slight thaw in the aggressiveness of the regime; there was some relaxation, a spasm of temporary weakness in the cruel mask it otherwise wore.

In all ranks of the Soviet security services, the ruling approach during the war with Germany was one of violence. It evoked the bestial impulses of the interrogators—beatings, torture, and executions became routine. The mighty war against the cruelest of enemies justified oppression domestically, which was a kind of continuation of the Stalinist terror of the thirties. As in any war, human life was cheap. As millions of Soviet patriots—in quotation marks, and without them—were dying in battle and in the enemy's concentration camps, and millions more were sentenced to suffer humiliation and hunger at the hands of their Nazi conquerors, was there room to worry about how to handle "traitors"?

The machinery, well oiled during the years of the purges, continued full steam ahead.

We were arrested 16 months after the cessation of fighting; at that point, apparently, the merciless treatment of prisoners was given a time-out. A recess—no more than that; perhaps some kind of order was given to behave with some restraint during interrogations.

I know that, by 1948, the authorities once again were using uncontrolled violence, but during my time at Lubyanka there was—evidently—a relative lull in the use of such methods.

Second, an interrogation in Moscow—in the prisons of the main office of a government ministry—would be somewhat different than an interrogation in a small town. An interrogator whose patience ran out during an interrogation session in Moscow, near the leadership of the regime, would know that someone was monitoring his actions and would need permission to use violence. His colleague in a remote location who had problems in squeezing out a confession or other information he sought to obtain from a prisoner, could "take shortcuts" using

beatings or other abuse without this necessarily coming to the attention of his superiors. As we know, an interrogator who uses violence at the outset to further the interrogation becomes brutalized and starts inflicting suffering on his victims for his own amusement or as a way of releasing tension.

The interrogation methods used on Kopel and his comrades—whose interrogation began a few months before ours and was conducted in a city far from Moscow and near the area where nationalist Ukrainians were active—were evidently influenced by two factors: the direct contact between the interrogators and the local enemy and the arbitrariness typically found in places far removed from supervision. The interrogation of the Lvov defendants was brutal—they were all beaten.

At Lubyanka, as I said, an interrogator needed permission to use force, and even though permission was not necessarily hard to obtain, one had to proceed cautiously.

There may have been a third factor working in our favor: Mulka and I were arrested at the end of September of 1946, when Stalin and his advisers had already formulated their Middle East policy, which included support for the establishment of a Jewish state. The Moscow interrogators, led by Pitovranov, who had close ties with elite leaders, were confronting the questions of how to deal with the “emissaries” of the future Jewish state who fell into their hands—perhaps it was undesirable to have friction just at present with that country? Perhaps it was best not to cross the boundary between heavy pressure and torture? Possibly, one day, they would decide “upstairs” to let the two of them go to the Jewish Palestine as a gesture to the new state? Perhaps they might be useful in exchange for Soviet agents who failed on a mission in the West or the Middle East?

I have no satisfactory answer to these questions.

I do not make light of the suffering caused by the “liberal” Soviet methods of interrogation, which I experienced personally. This treatment reduced me to a feeling that I could not go on. But beatings would have caused me intolerable humiliation—screaming, shouting, begging them to stop, pleading for mercy ... That humiliation I was spared.

The screams that sometimes rent the nighttime silence in the prison were bloodcurdling; not too far away from you, in a box in the corner of the corridor, was a human being, whose ability to withstand the suffering—even if only emotional suffering—had reached its limit. His world was collapsing around him and he would pound his head against the wall because only thus could he dull the pain in his heart.

When it seemed to me that I would not escape the fate once meted out by the Romans to the famous ten Jewish martyrs, I prayed that one or another of their four modes of capital punishment would save me the effort of pleading for help or shouting for them to release my body from its torment.

Why does whoever it is in the “box” cell nearby burst out screaming? He is alone there, and his tortures are not physical ... ?

Perhaps he had thought long and hard, analyzing what the interrogator had told him until he understood that the trap was closing in around him—his arguments refuted, his fate sealed; his life, which he had devoted to the party, the people, and the army, now forfeited to Moloch. He would never again be what he had been before falling into the clutches of the security services ...

And perhaps they had revealed to him that his good and devoted wife had been, ever since he met her, the agent who reported “to them,” but he cannot comprehend it, and cannot bear it?

The jailer taps with his keys on the hatch. Get up. But this time I am not taken for interrogation. Meantime I had slept, and the sleep left its blessed marks on my body and mind. Every inch of me now sighs in relief, despite the punishment I endured. I would have stayed longer in that sweet sleep if the guard had not been prodding me to get up.

Every day for years afterwards I would mentally bless the coming of evening with its tidings that I could lie down on my pallet, and close my eyes, and no one would put a hand on my shoulder, whispering “Your name?” and ordering me to get up and get dressed ...

Had they drawn the line, last night, beyond which they would not go? Or was this a terrible, tangible warning: “See, we can also treat you this way?”

Were they hesitating at violence or was it a warning? Had I prevailed, or was my surrender merely postponed? Some kind of compromise, and if so—what kind? Two months of attrition had passed. What next? They are experienced now; they know I’m almost ready to break, don’t they? Or are they persuaded that I am capable of continuing and all they sought was to test my response? Or maybe that was my last warning: From attrition we will now proceed to violence? Or, on second thought: Our case is an unusual one for them. They are interested in a real investigation: “Don’t invent anything. Don’t libel yourself. Even if you do, we won’t believe you. We can demand the truth. And if you try to persuade us that you are the devil incarnate, or the Pope from Rome (I did not focus on how unlikely they were to have said that), we won’t believe you. We want to hear the truth, and only the truth. Don’t libel yourself.” How should I interpret such sentences, repeatedly spoken by them? Since when is the truth so important to them? Why did they not give me a transcript for “verification” and demand that I sign it? But they did not even hint at that ...

What do they know? More than once, Pavlov burst out: “You want us to show you what we already know. Right? How smart you are, what a clever fellow ... You think we are fools here?”

Responses like those matched what I sensed: A confession from me was not a requirement in order for them to send my case to court, since “treason against the

motherland” was inherent in the purchase of an evaculist from Karpov. We could actually have been put on trial the day after our arrest, but they were holding out—undoubtedly because they wanted to know how the underground operated, to understand its nature, to learn about the financial and logistical means it employed, about its ties with the local bureaucracy and with Zionist organizations across the border. The instructions given to them were to use the interrogation to get real facts and to examine their own failure in not apprehending us for so long.

All that was logical, but perhaps I was wrong? Perhaps it was only what I wished to believe, whereas they were working toward some other objective?

What did I really want? Who and what was I defending? Whom can I rescue from further problems if I go on this way and sentence myself to remaining silent? And for how long? (And isn’t this type of heretical musing a kind of white flag that I am raising out of the hole I have dug myself into?)

... Is it that they have to find out how it came about that a group of young Jews, without help from any foreign security or spy services (or maybe actually with their help? That certainly demands investigation!) was able to desecrate the sanctity of what the authorities term “the hermetically sealed borders of the motherland”? Is that what Shmulyakov and Zimenkov meant by their ridiculous claim: “We know about your ties to Intelligence”? Maybe they were hoping, in that way, to obtain some enlightenment on that subject, since the Fourth Branch is responsible for guarding the state’s borders?

It would have been more convenient for them if they could have rationalized their failure on the basis that some other, powerful agency was involved in our activities, rather than confess to the higher echelons that a bunch of amateurs were poking fun at them ...

Given the claim about “ties with British Intelligence,” I was skeptical: smuggling Jews into Palestine with the help of the British? That’ll be the day! Nonetheless, it was this possibility that preoccupied them, evidently, and anyway an “imperialist connection” of any kind soothed the distress of excusing their own failure to themselves and to their superiors.

That may explain why they brought me straight to Moscow, since obviously the provincials in Vilna and Minsk could not handle a sensitive subject like this one.

And another question: Is the flight from Poland westward also bothering them? Hard to imagine ... For this purpose, the Polish borders on the west are not really their borders, although one may assume that the mass flight of Jews from there was known to them ...

With considerable logic I could argue that I am not well informed on this subject: I have no idea what goes on in Poland.

Not so Mulka, however.

A solution for my dilemma came a day later.

The guard put me into MEAT / BREAD and transported me from Lefortovo to Lubyanka, to Zimenkov's room. The head of the investigations division began speaking in a relaxed tone. He talked with me for the first time—or such was my impression—without condescension and without spite, saying that he was going to switch my interrogators and expressing the “hope” and “confidence” that I would “examine my behavior.”

I did not respond, but he did not seem to expect a response. Since when do they consult with the accused regarding who will interrogate him? That night, the night of the punches withheld, possibly intended solely to gauge my emotional endurance, was as if it had never been. The *polkovnik* called the guard to take me back to Lefortovo.

What was the meaning of this meeting? A new trap?

Another day of rest, and another ...

When the guard took me out of my cell for a daytime interrogation, my “sleep bank” had accrued nearly three nights in a row!

Behind the desk sat a major. When he got up from his chair, I noticed a very large man—he must have weighed about a hundred and twenty kilograms, perhaps more. His face was very Russian, very open.

“Vasily Yakovlevich Sidurov,” he said, introducing himself. “Henceforth we will be working together.”

His voice was relaxed and his gaze, unlike Pavlov's, was neither skeptical nor devious. There was something rustic-looking about him, like his name ...

Caution!

During a conversation about this and that—to get acquainted, of course—he told me in that relaxed voice that he had seen me “that same night,” but he did not elaborate, did not express an opinion, and did not reproach. I did not recall him from that confrontation. In the dim light of the room I had identified those who approached me by their voices, and he had not been among those speaking.

A getting-acquainted conversation ... With that sort of introduction, I did not spurn the hand extended to me, as it were, by the new interrogator who sought to get to know me. There would always be time to declare war. I had no doubt that he had received a detailed briefing from his superiors, had read my file and the main file containing details of our activities and our capture, plus other relevant intelligence.

Sidurov hardly touched on the subject of the interrogation. He decided—or perhaps had been advised—to spend a little time in my company and get to know me. Evidently that was customary. In chatting with me, he avoided sensitive areas that might evoke a negative response from me. I became even more alert, but did not demand that he get to the point; why make it easy for him? I tried not to give him a reason to lose his temper, although I knew I could not avoid it indefinitely.

The quiet during those days of calm was enchanting; every day restful, and even more so the nights, and all of them mine.

Sidurov ended the interrogation. No, the meeting, the getting-acquainted meeting, by saying he would invite me again the next day. He wanted to understand what my family had been doing in Dvinsk. The warden took me back to my cell.

What happened? What was the meaning of this behavior? Why was the interrogator changed? Assuming that Pavlov needed a rest—during the last two weeks I had seen him falling off his feet, struggling along like me on a few minutes of sleep. But what of his hint about the connection between my family and Dvinsk? I did not see why I should have a problem explaining this connection to the interrogator, and it neither adds nor subtracts anything. Although a principle had been broken here—Sidurov gave up the weapon of surprise—unlike Pavlov, who loved surprise. One day, for example, he had taken from his drawer a photograph of which a part was covered with paper, and asked me if I knew the woman pictured there; by an instinct already deeply entrenched in me, I answered “no” (“no” can never hurt—one can always apologize and say “yes,” whereas the obverse, generally, is much harder). Pavlov smiled: “You don’t recognize your own sister?”

Oh, hell, where did they photograph her boarding a train? Is this a trap? Is she in custody? Playing stubborn is already a habit, but can I control how I respond when they surprise me? Can I appear unmoved when they use shock treatment? The photo might have been especially crafted to frighten me and take me by surprise; no one from my family has been caught, or returned to the Soviet Union—although with “pranks” like that, the interrogators can certainly ruin the emotional stability of the subject.

There was no point in hiding the story of my family’s journey to Dvinsk. To prevent the authorities in Riga from becoming suspicious that they had left their place of residence illegally (in the Soviet Union, a citizen may not just “disappear” from his fixed place of residence without reporting first to the police where he is headed), I asked them to circulate a rumor that my sister was getting married in Dvinsk and the family was moving there. In the residential record for the apartment building, checked by the police, they recorded: “Destination: Dvinsk.” By the time the authorities caught on to the lie, my family would be in Poland. Now the comprehensive check done by the interrogators had revealed a “mystery” that evoked the suspicion that I or my family had secret connections in Dvinsk ...

The explanation I gave the next day to Sidurov was the real one, which did not seem suspicious. That was the first time for me that an interrogator had given me a full day to prepare my homework. This did not mean, however, that henceforth they would permit me to prepare my answers to questions they asked me, but

the incident made one thing clear to me: The interrogators are not looking for a reason to trip me up; they want to hear the truth.

Mulka's tactics during his own interrogation, as he later related to me, were different than mine. Since he, too, was trying to delay things and postpone, as long as possible, discovery of the facts, to cover the tracks of the four who had been with us on the group document, Mulka kept his interrogators busy with research that was costly for the security services. His fruitful imagination wove fabulous stories about his myriad ties with various centers around Europe, to throw them off the track and keep them busy. He told the interrogators about liaisons in London, research centers in Munich, Zionist activists based in Paris who were preparing to harm the Soviet Union—and Pitovranov's people were not lazy; they investigated "in depth." They checked and checked again, and when they failed, they were apparently rebuked by their superiors and ordered to begin again. Meanwhile precious time was saved, and as it became clear that all his stories, all of which had seemed so reasonable, were complete fabrications, the interrogators found themselves in an embarrassing position. Thus Mulka acquired his reputation as a con artist and a liar, which did not unduly worry him.

Sidurov played the role of the "good cop": he exerted no pressure; he did not try to trap me into saying the wrong thing; when I asked him to, he rewrote things in the transcript to improve what I had expressed badly. He returned my eyeglasses, so important to someone as impatient as I am; and he conducted the interrogations only in the daytime. Occasionally Zimenkov would appear to remind me of my sins, looking for a way to hurt me, but I had long since ceased to become upset by his style. After about a week I was returned to Lubyanka—a step undoubtedly viewed as a sign of mercy. At night, I slept undisturbed. Such luxury!

The compromise, although it was never mentioned, reached after the night of the threatening fists—even if it was not drawn up "as per both sides," neither in writing nor orally—was in practice something like this: After conversing about this and that for a quarter of an hour, Sidurov would say that today he wanted to talk about some particular subject; for example, "recruitment of the people being transported to Poland" (the term "recruitment" was very commonly used in the Soviet Union to indicate attaching a person, by force, to the huge network of informers serving the security services). In this particular instance I had no trouble replying. I related that I myself had "recruited" my friends and acquaintances whom I knew to be reliable; while they, for their part, were allowed to recruit their own trusted friends and comrades. The circle grew, but was comprised of people we could rely on. I also confirmed that we had obtained for them various forged documents as needed and used the signatures of state institutions—this had no effect either way on the severity of my crime. With Article 58 of the crimi-

nal code already in my bag—the section that promised those who sheltered under its wings “the maximum penalty,” meaning “death by firing squad”—I could permit myself the luxury of confessing to lesser crimes; a “state criminal” can afford to look down on lesser folk. Mulka and I having been honored with Article 58 and three subsections thereof, we could both behave with utmost freedom, in the sense of “what does it matter now?” We had no doubt whatever that this Article would see us through to our last day on the soil of Mother Russia, because the trial would be conducted behind closed doors, in the manner of a court-martial in the field, and if we were sentenced to “the maximum penalty,” they themselves might convert it to ten years at hard labor. And if we did not submit an appeal for clemency—but they decided that it was best for them not to eliminate us physically—they themselves would submit (or claim that someone else had submitted) the appeal, and convert the punishment to ten years at hard labor in closed labor camps in remote locations.

Thus what was the point of agonizing over how to talk during interrogations, or struggling to phrase something better, to justify or to regret our “crimes”? We could calmly confess whatever we wished; the “decade” was a foregone conclusion, already in our pocket, and if the political situation deteriorated in the country and the great leader Joseph Stalin were to amplify the terror—they would sentence us to death, and would then either carry it out or pardon us—whether we asked for a pardon or not ...

This fatalism was not the result of emotional exhaustion. I knew very well that, in the Soviet Union, judicial proceedings did not have the same meaning they did in nations with intact legal systems. The role of the interrogation was not to reinforce guilt or guarantee a conviction; it was to broaden the circle of defendants. The investigators made sure to record and file every word uttered (and sometimes even not uttered) by the subject. The transcripts recorded during the sessions were very detailed, and were composed using highly logical procedures—as in an enlightened nation—but all that was written, and signed, had not the slightest connection with the eventual sentence. That is how it was in 1946, in cases handled by the security services.

Thus there was only one thing forbidden to the defendant: mentioning people whose names had not been mentioned by the interrogators.

But ...

I remember the night that Pavlov came back to me to wind up the interrogation: the “finish.” In the “summary” written in my name, he wrote a sentence which began thus: “Since I hate the Soviet regime ...” or, in a more generous translation—“Since I am imbued with hatred for the Soviet regime ...,” and then he began enumerating my sins without exaggeration; the truth was sufficient.

I refused to sign. Pavlov looked at me in amazement: why do you refuse?

I told him that a phrase like that had never passed my lips, and he should not put such words in my mouth. It was his phrase, not mine.

Pavlov did not understand my refusal. An opening line like that in a summary of a defendant's interrogation was, for him, routine. Thus he had been taught, evidently. And I did not deny the facts he had put forth; so what did I care?

Although I understood that this "introductory sentence" had become so institutionalized that it was considered essential, I energetically refused to sign the transcript with that sentence included. I knew the words had no practical or legal implications, but I was enraged at the fact of a system that added phrases distorting what I had said.

"So, what then? You are a supporter of the Soviet regime?" he responded. He was incapable of understanding my explanation. Nor did he understand me when I told him that, if there had been a regime in the Soviet Union like that of Switzerland, and if that "Switzerland" had prevented me from exercising the right to leave its national borders, I would with clean conscience break the Swiss laws prohibiting me from doing so; I would flee and I would help other Jews to flee to Palestine from any state in the world that forbade it, whether Turkey, France, Sweden or Bulgaria ...

He could not come to terms with that sort of approach.

I turned the tables on him. I asked him whether he would not have behaved the same way had anyone prevented him from coming from any other place to his homeland, to the Soviet Union.

We argued and bargained until dawn and then I wrote the transcript my own way, in my own hand (apparently he did not want to diverge, in his own handwriting, from the accepted format).

He "recruited" Zimenkov to help persuade me, but it did him no good.

After this strange "battle" I asked myself whether it was really important to waste a whole night arguing about the phrasing of a transcript in the file, which has no real importance whatever. Is there any use, any importance, in such nerve-wracking effort over a sentence that no one values?

Once, when he claimed that I was a crazy zealot, I told Pavlov about the old saying that, if an idolater orders a Jew to tie his shoelaces the way the idolater ties his own—the Jew would die rather than do as ordered ...

No, I myself am not a zealot. But he will believe that I am ...

■ ■ ■

When did they figure out about Mulka—his role, his position in our underground, his job as a *bricha* emissary for *Mossad LeAliya Bet* [Institution for Immigration B]?

I find it hard to fix a date, though it is a fact that they did not know about

him to begin with. If we had assembled the fictitious “families” differently for Karpov’s documents, for the last six who were leaving on Friday, September 27, when we were all supposed to meet at Brest, it might have been Mulka slipping away to Poland like Ella and Shimon, Nehemia and Sarah. If we had “ordered” six evaculists from Karpov, with Mulka designated as a brother or brother-in-law of one of the couples, and I had gone alone to the express train—he would have gone to Poland; and if we both had been registered in our documents using different family names, even though we boarded the train together, they would have let Mulka go at the Baranovich train station just as they let go the nameless woman who was detained along with us.

If only ...

This “if only” is reasonable, because the agents of the secret police had no idea who or what Mulka was—and they were not looking for him! For eight days they held him at Baranovich and did not know what they ought to do with him, until an instruction came from Moscow to send him there, too. His role was not at all clear to them. As for me, meanwhile—the fish they had landed via the Moscow Bureau of Attorneys—they locked me up and thought they’d caught the head of the underground. That it was actually Mulka who was the “number one”—they did not know. I was their object.

That this was so, did not at first occur to me, early in the investigation.

And in the realm of “what if ...,” I can say further that, had Mulka crossed the border with the other four, he certainly would not have sat at Lodz wringing his hands—and it is doubtful that he would have sent a messenger to the Soviet Union to find out at the scene whether it was possible to do anything for the prisoners; he himself would have crossed the border and returned. And then? What then? One may guess that he would have been caught, and his fate would not have been different.

Mulka was kept for fifty days in the “box”—he told me this when we met—but he didn’t have time to tell me what it was the interrogators were trying to get out of him. This was not the highest priority at our stolen meeting.

I don’t know if he himself was the one who revealed to them what his role was. But when the interrogations ended, they already had their bearings as to our command hierarchy. My assumption is that Mulka took responsibility for our campaigns to make things easier on me.

The security services’ initial mistake as to the correct ranking of our positions had consequences for both our futures—fatal consequences, in Mulka’s case. Possibly, for reasons of prestige, the bureaucrats who handled our case did not want to admit to their error, so I continued to be viewed as public enemy number one, and not Mulka, though he actually was. And since Mulka continued to be presented as a con man and adventurer—handled by the sworn Zionist: me—he was sent, after sentencing, to the camps mainly for confirmed criminals, while I

was sent to a camp where most of the inmates were political prisoners; and later on when a network of “*osoblag*” camps was set up for the “dangerous political” prisoners, I was sent there—whereas he, Mulka, remained with the criminals.

Perhaps this chain of events is what doomed him.

I easily avoided providing certain details to my interrogators. Our activists who had managed to get away to Poland worked some of the time at their own discretion, as it were—such as when making connections with people we needed in the small towns, or in paying bribes to bureaucrats. And I also argued that the people working in the field knew what they were about and that there was no need to advise them or receive explanations from them. I was exempt from knowing what was done in Poland and how the *bricha* operated there.

More than once Sidurov would be writing my responses down in the transcript and would stop, look at me, and addressing the room would say, “This is a total lie, complete nonsense ...” But he would write down what I said, as I had said it, gesturing with his hand as if to say, “So, let it be that way ...”

Our interrogators knew the system for getting people across the border; they knew about the episode of the convoy being caught in Vilna and other details that neither I—nor, sometimes, Mulka either—had any interest in being stubborn about. These were things that could no longer damage our friends who had crossed into Poland.

Immeasurably more important was not to mention the names of people who had helped us. They did not know in whose home I stayed in Vilna after I fled from the train; I claimed that I slept in the forest. Incidentally, when the incident of my jumping from the train in Lida came up, I suddenly felt an enormous urge to jab them—apparently, there is such a thing—until I finally asked Sidurov: “Your comrades who were tailing me on the train—how did they look when they had to come back with nothing and admit that the object of their surveillance had disappeared?”

Sidurov was embarrassed, but recovered and said in a milder than usual tone: “Nonsense—that was all your imagination. We had no surveillance on you.”

I did not insist. Who am I to rub salt in the wounds of a senior secret service agent in the Soviet Union?

One day with Sidurov it was apparent that they knew of the “death” of Isaac Katz in Tashkent—the soldier serving at the prison camp in Riga, whose untimely passing our friend Leah in Tashkent, his unfortunate “bride,” had lamented in a letter to the prison camp commandant.

Once again he demanded of me: Why were you concealing this matter from us?

We spent a few days on the Afghanistan chapter—the plan, never actually implemented, to get people over the border that way. I figured that they had searched

their archives, maybe even sent a messenger to Tashkent and other places where we had a presence or were active, to check on whatever intelligence information had accumulated there from those days. Clearly their mistakes embarrassed them, and especially painful was the knowledge that their people could have arrested us a long time ago, but had missed their chance on several occasions.

When after a few months of “work” with me, Sidurov would ask if that were “all,” I would answer that indeed that was all. Later, when he learned something new about our misdeeds, from some other material that had reached him meantime, he would be angry with me as if I had cheated and betrayed him ...

I was brought to Zimenkov. What now?

I was not truthful, he alleged. Although I had not yet guessed the intention in these introductory words, I stated that I had never undertaken to be truthful in my contacts with the interrogators. If he or the others had understood me differently—they were mistaken.

Zimenkov asked if I knew anything about Mulka’s detention in Brest.

So, this is evidence that they have uncovered that affair—his imprisonment and his escape, and the matter of the suitcase with two thousand dollars in it, which he left behind for them ...

What of it?

“We thought that you had chosen to recant”

I told him: “Then you were mistaken. I never planned to recant and never said I would recant.”

Is there anything here I could change? Another few pages in Mulka’s transcript?

July brought the “arranged confrontation” approach. The interrogators began bringing two defendants from among those mentioned in our file, and sought to find out what was really true whenever their statements were contradictory.

The confrontation with Eliyahu Kroll was easy, as far as I was concerned, because he himself had prepared forged papers for Mulka, and I could claim that I had no idea how he made them or on what basis he had issued them.

When I learned from my interrogator during the investigation that Eliyahu Kroll had also been arrested and his case joined to ours, I reacted by making fun of the idea, along the lines of “What, Kroll is also a political type?”—In an attempt to minimize his importance and with luck also his interrogation and his punishment. Those in charge of the interrogation knew very well that Eliyahu was not privy to information about our work, but they were looking to broaden the circle of those involved in the affair. Eliyahu was very depressed. While he was incarcerated, his wife gave birth to a daughter. He knew how hard it would be for her to make a living and raise the child alone while he was in a prison camp.

After the formal part of the confrontation was over, the interrogators—dur-

ing my confrontation with Eliyahu Kroll it was Sidurov alone, because he was the interrogator working with both of us—would permit themselves to converse with a certain degree of freedom. Sidurov asked Eliyahu whether he had any complaints. Eliyahu shook his head and said that his and his wife's lives were ruined in any case, and then indicating me he said that for me, a bachelor, it was easier than for him. Sidurov angrily sprang to my defense, as if I had asked him to.

"Only you have it bad in prison? Whereas —Sidurov gestured toward me—he is sitting in a hotel, not in a prison cell? You have a wife? He also has someone waiting for him. And right here, in Moscow!"—And he was off on a tangent, complimenting the illustrator, but without mentioning her name.

I opened my eyes wide: Wow! I had no idea that I had such a dedicated advocate, right here inside Lubyanka!

Let there be no mistake ...

Two of my comrades in the camp, Moshe Grinberg and Marek Kazanin, were interrogated by that same Sidurov. When Moshe Grinberg, a Jew from Poland, told me how Sidurov—"your tsaddik"—would pound him into bits with his fists, I permitted myself some uncertainty as to the credibility of the witness. But it was impossible not to trust Marek Kazanin. During his interrogation at the "Little" Lubyanka (the civil prison, adjacent to the "Big" Lubyanka), the huge, heavy Sidurov used to throw him to the ground, kick him, and jump on his back.

Mark Kazanin was one of the more outstanding people I met, a man of encyclopedic knowledge, whose credibility cannot be assailed. I believe his testimony.

A Jew about fifty-five years old, short of stature, wizened—he could not have weighed more than fifty kilograms—left prone on the floor of the interrogator's room, while the latter tramples him with his boots ...

That was Sidurov, my "tsaddik."

The second confrontation was with Ilka Zaiden ... To see him here, in Lubyanka! His being in jail was the end of a sad family drama. I could not help him, nor could I do him damage. His fate had already been sealed in Riga.

I knew that there would be a confrontation with Mulka, too. Beforehand, I purchased a few packs of cigarettes in the prison commissary, which I paid for using the money being kept for me in the prison office.

One day I had a hunch that I was going to be taken to this confrontation with him. I thrust the cigarettes into my pocket and presented myself to the guard as

the door opened; he took me to a room I had not yet been in. Sitting there were Mulka, Pavlov, Sidurov and a stenographer—a very old woman with a pleasant, intelligent look about her. How had she survived? What was she doing here? Perhaps she had been a rebel in her youth?

They would seat the prisoners in the corners of the room at a distance from one another, to prevent them from falling on one another and embracing, or exchanging any signals of any kind—or accusing or insulting one another, or even coming to blows ...

When I was brought into the room, Mulka stood up in the far corner and the two of us came toward each other quickly so as not to give them time to separate us. We hugged and kissed. The interrogators jumped up and separated us, berating us, but we did not care.

Mulka was unshaven. His face was drawn ... Perhaps I appeared the same way to him.

The interrogators began asking the usual confrontational questions: “Are you acquainted with one another?” (General laughter); “Have you any grievances against one another?” (More laughter); “How long have you known one another?”

The substantive questions focused on a few confessions we had made that had been recorded in the transcripts but did not match. Whenever an interrogator sought to establish which of us was telling the truth, I claimed it was Mulka, and Mulka—that it was I. Mulka tried to take responsibility for a few acts; I claimed that “Yaffe has forgotten”—the crime was mine. Those present knew we were clowning around, that we were not taking this legal process seriously, and somehow this diminished the tension that gripped everyone. At an appropriate moment, I took the cigarettes out of my pocket and asked Pavlov if I were permitted to give them to my friend. Pavlov was surprised: “How did you know you would be summoned to a confrontation?” I told him that it seemed like the time had come ... Pavlov looked as though he suspected someone of having leaked it to me, and there you have it—a Zionist connection in the inner sanctum of the Soviet security services! Still, he took the packets from me and promised to hand them over. Evidently he wanted first to make sure that there was no message in there somewhere for Mulka.

We sat together in the same room a little longer, talking. Finally they ordered Mulka to get up. I also got up and went to him. We parted with a bear hug.

I saw the woman who was taking notes lift her gaze tearfully to the window ...

Dear God! Had this old woman witnessed only hatred, betrayal and meanness in the years she had passed in this institution? Were the two of us really so exceptional?

And another routine ceremony—a visit from the military prosecutor.

The man in the colonel’s uniform was of retirement age. His official role was

to make sure that the legal process was proceeding properly. He murmured something to the effect that everything appeared to be in order, asked whether I had any complaints, whether I had been shown the order of imprisonment ... and having nothing else to do, he thumbed through the interrogation files—six thick volumes, with about eighteen hundred pages ...

“Have you any requests?”

“No. None.”

Suddenly he put all the paperwork aside and asked whether I have parents, and how old they are. I told him.

“Where are they?”

“In Palestine.”

“No, no,” he responded, shaking his head, “you Jews are not long-lived. They won’t see you again ...”

He did not say this regretfully, nor with any joy at the misfortune of “an enemy of the people” or a “traitor to the motherland.” He was simply stating a fact.

The contemptible fellow was right. I would not see them again.

One day I was taken to one of the rooms in Lubyanka, where Pavlov pointed to the six volumes. As stipulated by Article 206 of the procedural code, I would now be allowed to read the transcripts of the interrogations, scrutinizing them thoroughly, and even to read the transcripts of my accused comrades. Finally I would have to append my signature to show that I had seen the material brought for my examination.

The files were thick with an abundance of administrative paperwork—documents which neither amplify nor reduce; plus permits to detain, interrogate, confiscate, summon witnesses ...

“Protocols of the Youths of Zion”! Each volume bore the inscription: “Preserve permanently”—“*khranit vetchno*” ...

There were no surprises. All the accused behaved wisely during their interrogation, although gradually, over the course of a blameless year on the prisoners’ part, the interrogators yet managed to interpret the main points; and given that we were engaged in the removal of hundreds of individuals and families who then disappeared entirely off the map of the country, was it not impossible to have done such conspicuous work without leaving a trace?

We managed to protect a handful of people. Indeed, at the end of the campaign—incredible as it was to have conducted it, in that country, for nearly a year—the number of “casualties,” i.e., the prisoners, was not great, including the Lvov people. To put it somewhat cynically: the price was ... reasonable.

I leafed through the volumes, occasionally feeling myself holding my breath: Here was a photo of the dollars that Mulka had left behind when he fled Brest, arranged fanlike so that the total sum was visible.

Here was a photo: Mulka and me, in Vilna, in the spring of 1946.

Here were two exit documents to Poland: Pavel Fishman, Yaacov Fishman ...

Now look! Here is “a list of the people to be arrested if and when they are found in the territory of the Soviet Union.”

They are already in *Eretz Yisrael* or en route there. Try and find them!

The four were also on the list. Go ahead, try and find them. The four, too! My throat was dry. My eyes damp ... They got away, they got across. Thanks to our tormented silence. They got there!—Go ahead, let them search!

No. They won't return all of those people ...

That's it. They've exhausted all the procedures. So it is, in the democracy to top all democracies. Now—to court. The military tribunal. I will even have an advocate. I have no idea whom they will appoint. Perhaps I'll tell him: “Thank you, but no.” We can assume that the trial will take place behind closed doors in Lubyanka or Lefortovo. Journalists will certainly not be monitoring it, but I don't denigrate the advantages that may accrue to us from the performance—we will meet one another, we will make heart-wrenching speeches, their attempts to stop our activities will appear ridiculous, we will cause annoying procedural problems. We will show them that they cannot easily get the better of us with their will to act according to their law, never mind that their law is fundamentally distorted. Of course having a large audience would be advantageous, but we cannot hope for that, although surely the “people in the know” in Moscow will be unable to resist relating anecdotes afterwards about the strange trial of the “mad Zionist group” (who intended to hand over Ukraine to England?). We can imagine the lies they tell about us, but Jews will hear and smile—they will understand. A word to the wise is sufficient.

We must be prepared to be asked all kinds of questions. We must exploit every opportunity to make them sound ridiculous. Ridicule is the weapon of the weak. They want a trial? They'll get one!

Very soon they will show me the formal charges in writing, detailing my sins under Soviet law. I will not confess to anti-Soviet propaganda. I never preached against the regime, although the regime deserved it; I had no interest whatsoever in the governance of this country; is there anyone who thinks well of it? Let him live here all his life and he will get what he deserves. I never advised anyone to fight against it or try to destroy it; I never even pressured anyone to go on *aliya* to *Eretz Yisrael*—people ran after me, sought me out, asked me to get them out. I wasn't involved in Zionist propaganda. A Jew who wants to emigrate from the Soviet Union to Palestine does not need anyone to “influence” him or pressure him.

I have not betrayed the motherland. I never swore allegiance to the Soviet Union. I was not born in this country, hence I could not betray her. I organized as an activist, not against the regime, but rather against the security system or social

character of the Soviet state. Let its proponents live here, of their own free will ...

I admit that I broke the immigration regulations (which do not exist, by the way), and in the course of doing so, I forged documents and received others in unlawful ways. I organized groups of Jews who wanted to leave—I organized for that purpose; and yes, I am also guilty of illegally acquiring foreign currency.

What else? I lived in Vilna without a *propiska*. I had no proper job. Is that enough?

I do not delude myself that they will listen to my nonsense, but still we will be a nuisance to the judges and the prosecutor, and if the defense attorney starts to blather in a way not acceptable to us—we will get rid of him. We will defend ourselves.

In short, in the best revolutionary tradition of Tsarist Russia, we will play the game whereby a political trial becomes a circus, a platform for propaganda—and they are the ones who will lose. We have nothing to lose; we will teach them, at least, to behave properly toward the “Jews of 1946”!

The guard brought me to the fifth floor, to the commandant of the prison. After a few minutes' wait, I was taken into the commandant's office, where a bespectacled colonel in the internal security services, Jewish in appearance, ordered me to sit. To his question as to whether I had received the written charges, I replied in the negative. He asked whether I knew that my file had been sent to the “*Os-soboeya Soveshchanya*,” i.e., the secret Special Council. I opened my eyes wide and replied that they had not troubled to inform me.

“I was authorized to inform you of the decision of this Council. Stand up!”

What? Why did they skip the trial, when they did not lack witnesses to testify about our doings? Were they afraid that word of our actions would leak, embarrassing them?

I stood up from my chair. The bespectacled colonel facing me also stood. He held a document in his hand, which he read aloud:

The Special Council attached to the Ministry for State Security, in its session of 30 August 1947, has heard and adjudged the content of file number (such-and-such) of (my personal identification), accused of carrying out the crimes detailed in Article 58, Subsection 1, first paragraph; Article 58, Subsection 10, second part; Article 58, Subsection 11, second paragraph of the criminal code of the Russian Socialist Federated Republic, and has decided to imprison the forenamed in remote camps for rehabilitation by means of labor for a period of twenty-five years with the confiscation of his personal property for the benefit of the state.

“Do you understand?”

“Understood.” (You wanted a trial, including an advocate whom you could abuse?)

“Sign here to show you have been apprised of the decision of the Council.”

I signed on the other side of the document, in the place reserved for signature (the speeches are all done).

“Have you any questions?”

“Yes, two. First: Do I have the right to appeal before a higher court?”

“No, there is no higher court.”

“Will they permit me to be sent to a camp together with those who were tried with me?”

The man gazed at me as at someone who has lost his mind, or perhaps he had not understood the question. He gestured with his hand as if to say something between “no” and “don’t be a nuisance,” and instructed the guard to take me away.

The route from the prison commandant’s office with the guard took me straight to the basement, which I had not seen before. I was put into an empty cell.

Why an empty cell? I had been told that they makes things easier for you after you are found guilty, and put you into a large general cell with dozens of others who have been tried, sometimes even a hundred or more, all waiting to be sent to camps. In this cell you meet comrades from your case and your trial, the discipline is perfunctory, and you can “stand on your head”—they don’t care much what happens there ...

I had nursed a passionate hope that I would see Mulka in that cell, with the others—why then to a cell for one? Maybe because of the twenty-five? Twenty-five years’ imprisonment? Twenty-five! There is no such sentence. The war had been over for two years already. There was no sentence of 25 years. It was nonsense; what was it supposed to mean? If I had received a sentence like that, what had they meted out to Mulka? Fear hit me—a death sentence! A death sentence for Mulka! But there is no such thing as twenty-five years. There is a maximum sentence of ten years’ imprisonment, and beyond that—death by firing squad. Or perhaps the number “twenty-five” is their code for “death by firing squad?” How could I not have realized it right away? There is no sentence over ten years except death, which everyone in the “cell of ten” had predicted for me anyway, and now look—twenty-five! There is no twenty-five. Whom can I ask? Why am I not put into the common cell? Only those sentenced to death are put into cells all alone, in the basement ... If they make noise, no one hears them shouting, no one knows about it if they collapse ... It would infect the other prisoners in the other cells. Should I shout? To whom? Who would hear me, who would be outraged? The guard? The doctor who would stick the syringe in my buttocks?

Better instead that I consider my life, think about how I’ve lived it, about my parents and family ... Perhaps they will come for me yet tonight ... No self-pity now. You knew who you were up against. You knew the price they would exact.

Nothing extraordinary there; that is how they are. You didn't know? No shouting, now. No pleading. Shed no bitter tears. Walk down the dark corridor and hope for a bullet in the neck ... in the blink of an eye ...

And you wanted a trial, to wear them out? Let's see you laugh in that dark corridor, the corridor of death that has seen the agitators who brought revolution and this regime wallowing in their blood on its floor ...

Calm down; first of all, calm down. In any case, all the possibilities have been exhausted. Perhaps they will advise you to ask for clemency? Should I take their advice or send them packing "with your lousy humanism"? Maybe it's simply more than twenty-five years in those remote places? No, there's nothing worse than "nothing," and that's death—nothing ... If they want to, they'll let me live, without my asking; if they don't want to—any plea is useless. The people going to Ponary to be massacred, could they beg for mercy? Of whom? What right do you have? Even the right to send someone to Palestine in their place—a right you took for yourself—they did not have ...

At least the possibilities are limited. No point in thinking. Stay calm. Stay calm. Maybe it really is twenty-five? Twenty-five years' imprisonment—ten and ten and five. Are they crazy? How many? That's three hundred whole months, more than nine thousand days. I will be 52 when I get out. Mulka—53. It will be 1971. Maybe then they'll let us go to Palestine? Maybe this regime will fall before then? No. A regime like this one doesn't fall ...

Nine thousand days and another hundred and ... If we suppose that we got 450 people out—how many days did each one of them "cost" me? Twenty or twenty-one—about three weeks; a reasonable price, really. If one of the comrades had asked me to sit in Lubyanka or Lefortovo or a work camp in exchange for getting them to *Eretz Yisrael*—would I have refused them? Three weeks. It's not a lot. Three weeks for Leibele, or Fuldeh, or Sarah, for that woman from Lithuania with her "kindergarten" ("just keep them all Jewish")—nine souls, 27 weeks, half a year. Hah, maybe they'll give a discount for the children? And Mulka, too—half a year, and Ilka and Herman—less. How much did they get? How much do they have to pay for each person? Less, apparently.

In solitary, even that is something to keep one occupied.

But there is this suspicion that they're cheating, that it's not the real sentence, that it's a deception. Fraud. They always cheat. Not just when they put me into solitary—and I've never heard of their putting anyone alone in a cell after passing sentence—but that the cell is big, and the guard courteous like a waiter in a country pub—speaking softly, subserviently, his eyes liquid; ordinary soft linens on the bed ... Are they trying to lull me? Why would they? And the librarian who left me six books—six! Is that the last mercy allotted to me? The food is tasty today, even if I can't swallow it, I know it is tasty. Who invented that stupid phrase, "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"? If tomorrow we are going to die,

would we have an appetite today? If they suggest that I leave the cell for daily exercise—would I refuse? Would I? They wouldn't be embarrassed to drag me, so why resist? To demonstrate my opposition? For the record, like in the books? No. Silence; contempt! Maybe find a word, one word, precise, one word that says it all—maybe that would be the wise way to demonstrate opposition, whether it has a purpose or not, but the only way available?—Ridiculous! Those carrying out the instructions already know all that Maybe I'll ask them to wash their hands? Encourage them? "Don't be afraid, people, don't wet your pants" ... Will they think I've lost my mind? No, no, they won't understand. How far is the distance between leaving the cell and "nothing"? But I mustn't stumble ... Although really, what's the difference if I stumble or not? What is "nothing" if tonight is already the eve of "nothing"? For whom must I put on the performance? Enough! I'll behave like ordinary flesh and blood. If I'm afraid—I'll scream. I'll be embarrassed about screaming—but like a mechanized doll: it might be the stomach that shows bitterness at Pitovranov's sentence—or maybe I'll urinate, or slap someone's face ... If they don't do this in Red Square—they are hanging the traitors these days in the courtyard at Lubyanka—for whom, then, will I be performing? For Sidurov? Enough—I've done my bit. Perhaps I've been chosen as the scapegoat of the Jewish people? ... Or, aha, this is it, here we go, a "hero of Israel," look at his face peeking out, all twisted with fear, wanting public support and collective mercy; let them bring him the illustrator so that they can say their farewells, like in an opera, on stage ... Bring my mother here, my father—my father? What for? To pray "El maleh rachamim"? With or without a burial ceremony—I'm facing "nothing," that "nothing"! And Mulka?—In the morning he will ask them to bring him some shoe polish, or a book by Agatha Christie in English, or a new toothbrush—the old one is too soft already, it's a lousy Soviet product, after all!—oh, pay for it? Of course, from his funds in the prison bank, and then they will remind him: "Prisoner Yaffe, your funds have been confiscated for the benefit of the State. Have you forgotten that yesterday you signed the sentence, including confiscation of your property? You know that!" ...

The lock squeaks, the door opens: "Infirmary nurse!" Routine: "Any complaints?" "No!" the door slams. Why didn't I ask for something to make me sleep? Hell, I'll sleep plenty on the other side of the "nothing"!

"Outside - walk!"

Get up, don't think, just walk. They'll do as they wish.

The threshold, the corridor, the guard almost stepping on my heel.

Will he attack me from behind and throw me down on the concrete floor? We walk along the narrow corridor, me first, him behind me. Walking; walking. The door. The lock squeaks—and we go outside to the prison courtyard awash with sunlight, a kind of square chimney rising between the four wings of the tall

building that is Lubyanka. The two of us, the guard and me, beneath the chimney. This is the place for daily exercise.

"Hey, you with the glasses! Ten minutes! Don't go near the walls." Routine exercise. "Time ... is ... up!"

We walk again along the corridor to the cell. A corridor like any other.

Yes, tomorrow again I will be taken out for exercise, I'll walk along the corridor to the courtyard, and so forth, for eight days.

The Soviet newspapers published an order of the Supreme Soviet of July 4, 1947, annulling the death penalty, although the ceiling for punishment of perpetrators of serious crimes like theft of official or public property was raised to twenty-five years at labor and rehabilitation camps; at the request of the workers, of course.

That this order would also apply to political prisoners was not mentioned in the decree. In an enlightened country like the Soviet Union, there are no political prisoners—but they are alive and well in the criminal code.

We heard nothing of this news in our cell. Really, of what concern to us were serious economic criminals who had had their maximum imprisonment raised and the death penalty annulled? No one bothered to tell any of us about all that—and was it any of our business? If a nuclear war broke out, would they tell us about it? It has nothing to do with us, the prisoners; it's the generals' business, after all.

The sentence was read to Mulka on the same day it was read to me. The same charges. "Twenty-five years!" He asked to be shown the printed slip of paper rather than simply hearing it read by the man with the Jewish-looking face.

"You don't believe me?" The representative of Beria-Pitovranov-Zimenkov was insulted.

"I believe you, I believe you, but I am curious to see it. This is not an everyday occurrence."

He read it, turned the paper over and signed it. Had he not signed, they would have called two guards, read the document aloud in their presence, and the two would witness with their signatures that the accused had heard the sentence read.

From there—straight to the solitary cell.

Why did they prevent us from knowing about the annulment of the death penalty? Why after the sentencing were we taken down to the basement, each to his own solitary cell? As a "loving" farewell from the interrogation team? A planned incident?

And on the eighth day ...

On the eighth day, I was told to "come out with my belongings!" and the guard took me up to the "box" on the floor with the commandant's office. I knew that I would not be returning to the basement, and a little while later, indeed, the door

opened and a different guard, the one in charge of the prisoners' belongings in storage, brought in my suitcase. My shoelaces were tied to the suitcase handle lest they, heaven forbid, be lost. My coat, my shirts, my underwear ... greetings, old buddies! An entire year has passed since we parted ... The guard was holding my razor in his hand: "I am passing this on to the commander of the convoy—when you get there, he will give it to you."

What a clown, the storage man. The convoy commander will give you something ... he'll give you a kick!

'Check the items against the detailed list and sign the sheet to show that everything was returned to you.'

Lubyanka, I'm proud of you! Nothing was missing! The money and the wrist-watch were confiscated as the law requires. The razor—a deposit (non-refundable) with the convoy commander.

"Any complaints?"

They are in a hurry. We leave the box, go down to the courtyard, to the paddy wagon, called "the Black Crow." I am shoved inside and fall into the arms of my new companions. We set out on our way.

Toward a new life! The Lubyanka period is over (the old-timers claim that "that is the hardest period in the life of a prisoner; the period that follows it is harder").

Well, I have experience with that, too. The autumn sun is setting and its rays slant into the sealed paddy wagon. I look out through the slits. People—not in uniform!—are hurrying to and fro on the streets of the capital—children, adults, in a hurry, talking, laughing ... There is life on this planet. Not everyone is under investigation! I've passed this test; what was, may not return. Problems won't be lacking? True. But one year has ended, along with its curses. I've come out of this journey in one piece. I'm heading toward the labor camp years, with different people, a different life ...

Next to me sits a man in his forties. His dress shows him to be a city man, perhaps a Moscow resident. His face looks Russian, and bespeaks openness and kindheartedness. He doesn't take his eyes off me.

"Tell me, comrade, how long did they give you?"

"Twenty-five ... and you? How long?"

"Ten."

He looks at me in amazement mixed with appreciation: "Twenty-five, you say ... God in heaven! You say it so simply. Twenty-five. How to go on living? Mine is ten, and I cannot get used to the thought. Ten years! I cannot take it in ..."

Ten—something tangible; twenty-five—beyond comprehension ... The response to ten—reasonable; to twenty-five, hah, it's a joke! They can't be serious!

And maybe I'm wrong: The response to twenty-five is defensive and manifests itself as a slight hysteria, a cheerful laugh, an inner certainty that this thing will never happen.

I find it difficult to contain myself. The joy bursts through, pounding in my veins—I stayed alive, I made it through. I did not fail, nor did I sink anyone else ...

I told my sad neighbor about the *cadi* who had promised the king to teach his donkey to talk like a human being within a year. Within a year, maybe the king would die, or maybe the donkey ... My neighbor smiled.

Heads up, look around you—you are not alone ...

Something new is coming, and I'm curious. Yes, curious ...

The train station. The prisoners are counted. We jump down from the vehicles—and are counted; they hurry us with our belongings through a double column of guards—and count us; get onto the train—and they count us; walk up the narrow aisle—they count us; are shunted into screened compartments and the door closes on the crowded interior—and they count us; “Hey! Faces to the screen!”—and they count us ...

In the train compartment, there are four sleeping berths, two up and two down, and fifteen prisoners, twenty, twenty-two, maybe more. We have no way of knowing. Pressed together, we are one living, breathing, sweating, smelly mass.

Away we go!

It is all familiar. Far too familiar.

The crowded cars, full to bursting, to the point of choking, the emblem of an entire period. Compartments under heavy guard transporting prisoners of the state, Jews, criminals, Gypsies, prisoners of war, Russians, Poles, Germans, Croats, Khorbats, Ukrainians, displaced persons, hostages taken, hostages freed, for immediate extermination, for gradual extermination, for hard labor, for forced labor, en route to interrogation, returning from interrogation ...

Or to labor with the goal of “rehabilitation through labor.”

Orwell!

“My name is Herman Gurvich. Are you Yaka?”

Thus I was instantly acquainted with my comrade from our joint case file. On the trip from Lubyanka to the train, we were already together, and now we proceeded together.

His first words are engraved in my memory: “I read the file of the entire interrogation with bated breath. I had no idea. Only now have I understood the scope of the work done. You know, they gave me another three years, but I'm not sorry. I am proud to be a part of your group.”

We were pushed into the same compartment, but in one of the transfers from compartment to compartment or from one train carriage to another, we were separated. The connection was severed for many years.

The journey from Moscow to Gorky and from there north to the Arctic—to

the coal mining district of Vorkuta-Inta—was no different than any other prisoner’s journey. Crowding, pressing, hunger and thirst, and above all—the criminals, whose eye fell on whatever could be had of the foodstuffs ... and vodka, clothing and women—with the convoy—the guards—taking their share of the plunder.

But after the war, something happened in the kingdom of the fist and the knife. Before the war, during the thirties, the “politicals” were targeted by the criminal prisoners. Thieves, murderers, gamblers and rapists overpowered the very weak political prisoners—the bureaucrats (nurtured and cultivated by the party leadership), professors, musicians, authors, engineers, scholars—the “intelligent.” Toward the end of the forties, the type of political prisoner changed. Into the camps of Stalin and his gang streamed a generation of merciless proletarian fighters spawned by the regime—veterans of the Soviet army, veterans of the traitor Vlasov’s army, Ukrainian and Lithuanian partisans, World War II prisoners of war—and these had been schooled in survival somewhere between the Urals and the English Channel.

A war of Gog and Magog ensued for many years between the criminals and these stubborn politicals until finally the balance of power shifted, and thereafter, the confrontation between the two camps was decided in the first round—when the politicals were able to repulse the first attack of the criminal filth and throw their corpses at the feet of the astonished convoy—guaranteeing everyone their bit of bread and a restorative cup of water.

That’s how it was on the trains, and that’s how it was in the camps.

The logistical maneuvers of the convoy were an additional burden on life that was already hard enough in the prisoners’ carriages (called *Stolypins* after their inventor, Pyotr Stolypin, Interior Minister and later Head of the Russian Interior Ministry during the first decade of the 20th Century), which were attached to ordinary passenger trains. There was constant traffic of prisoners back and forth from compartment to compartment. The convoy added and removed prisoners both during the daytime and at night. Given the terrible crowding, the arrival of a new prisoner with his belongings caused a stir: An empty bucket would fall from above onto the head of a veteran prisoner; precious water was spilled; a hat was crushed; a cherished slice of bread disappeared in the confusion—it was all enough to set off a war of shouting, cursing and even punching. Everyone’s nerves were frayed.

Somewhere along the way, in all the confusion of the continual reorganization in the railway car, into my compartment with a group of a few prisoners, brought to us from another carriage, they tossed ... Mulka!

We stood facing one another mutely for a few seconds, recovering from our astonishment. A miracle! A torrent of words, sentences, information, plans, meaningless chat—helpless to “exploit” the time at our disposal—who knows

how much, a day or half an hour?—to slake the thirst to tell and to hear, to sum up, to make plans ...

We improved the code; memorizing the addresses in the Soviet Union and in Africa, and mainly in Palestine: Afikim is an address, and Ein Gev, and Kinneret; we have to reduce the number of addresses in Europe—we won't be able to remember them all; we have to remember the agreed-on terminology, good for a regular letter, not in code; we have to find citizens who are at large and through them send packages with messages in agreed-on locations; we must not involve Ruth; and above all, neither of us is to wait any longer for the other, not to waste precious time—if one gets free—he must not wait. He will find an opening and get out of there.

How?

There is no really satisfactory answer. Go back to the places known only to us, in Lithuania? Maybe they are already known to “them”? Look for the “green route”? We will have to decide based on the circumstances, but first of all—we are cancelling the mutual obligation. Getting to Palestine is paramount—at least one of us should get there ...

Escape from this iron trap, and flee? A wild dream?

In my heart I know that the time of miracles is over for us. Does Mulka know, too? Yes, he knows, but he won't accept it. I will. He—he will invent something, some crazy thing. Like when he traveled to Lvov to find out whether the *strashina* was in fact the traitor ...

Nobody has a claim on miracles. The *bricha* from Vilna, which was a success, is not like a recording that can be copied and recopied ...

In other words, have I accepted it? Twenty-five years! Am I reconciled to that? Miracles don't happen unless someone gets them started.

How?

Gorky Station. The exhausting unloading, the endlessly repeated head counts ... We are made to stand in groups of five, the more easily to be guarded and counted ... and on to the vehicles. They say there is a prison in Gorky—a fancy one, where you can rest ... with hot and cold water ...

Some Jew in the gray throng, arranged in groups of five, whispers: “Jews ... tomorrow is Yom Kippur ...”

Yom Kippur, my mother's birthday—if I still have a mother. Perhaps ... “*b'yagon sh'olah*” [signifying grief in old age] . If I could get away now, somehow, to the nearest post office and if I had all the money required, and if I were to write a telegram saying “Birthday greetings to my dearest mother and to the family and all our friends”—where would I send it? Where? To Afikim? To the kibbutz office?

Where are they all? Dammit, where are they?

I have not heard their voices for seventeen months now, since I sent them on their way ...

You, there, do you guess that I am still alive? That I am here? ... That Mulka is here beside me, yes, Mulka. He is here, too. And the two of us are together; together ... Are you satisfied? We are on our way to Gorky Prison ... The guard dogs are guarding us. No, they do not threaten us. Don't worry ...

Hey—we will hold on here: you, there, please be in touch and tell us ... something ...

Hey, we are on our way north ...

Something ... from you ...

Every prisoner had his own file, following him wherever he went. In this case, the file was with the convoy. On the cover, and on a special form, was the prisoner's formular—his "identity card." On the formular appeared his name, father's name, family name, date of birth, nationality, what he had been convicted of, the punishment, when his imprisonment had commenced, when it would end, and his fingerprints.

The prisoner has to know all of this information by heart and recite it whenever he is asked to identify himself. When he is moved from place to place—he will declaim this information, like a parrot, many times—many times indeed.

On Mulka's formular there was a red diagonal stripe from the upper right-hand corner to the lower left-hand corner—meaning: This prisoner is liable to flee. Take care! It was a warning to the convoy—to reinforce the guard on the man, not to leave him anywhere where the guard is too weak, to monitor him, to plant informers around him.

When he arrived at the camp, Mulka's file was brought to the particular attention of the camp's director, a secret service officer.

The red stripe—a souvenir of Brest!—would accompany him for the rest of his life.

Gorky Prison—what a dream! And not only because they were not dogging my every step. Lie down on this bench, lie down on the floor, feel at home ... The guards were not standing in front of your face as they did on the train, they didn't even peek through the hatch. They didn't bother you. The crowding was reasonable. And the baths! All the hot and cold water you could want ... The soup is hot, and if you're hungry—and who isn't?—you'll enjoy it ...

We spread the tattered blankets we received over the floor, and covered ourselves with a quasi-military coat of Mulka's—the "released soldier" from the Urals, who was hurrying back to his native Bialystok. The air is fresher near the floor ...

We talked and talked and talked, and fell asleep. The fatigue was too much for us.

Mulka outsmarted them on the parade ground and managed to peek at his for-

mular: Destination, Abez. He was being sent to Abez. The geography of the north is not yet clear to us, but some of the people in our cell have experience and know their way around the land of the camps.

Abez, erected in the snowy regions between Inta and Vorkuta—is near the northern Arctic Circle, where the day divides into half daylight and half night. The cold, unlike the light, rules Abez always. On climate maps, the place where Mulka is headed is marked “Arctic wilderness.”

North of Abez, on the boggy tundra, frozen most of the year, a railway line was laid to the east, parallel to the Moscow-Vladivostok line along the Pacific Ocean.

Stalin, whose idea it was, always thought big! An iron railway thousands of kilometers long, through regions without any human habitation. Human habitation? At the present rate of incarceration, there will be! The enemy—meaning, in this case, an external enemy—can no longer threaten to interrupt the connection between the Far East and Moscow! This will be an additional line of communication and supply.

Who will build this monster? Which workers and technicians will lay the line? And who will pay for it?

Comrade Lavrenti Beria has solutions: Increase the pace of arrests, and channel the shipments of slaves and prisoners after trial to the north—to the mines and the northern railroad!

At midday, they called my name and added: “With your belongings!” I was being sent to Inta—a camp about a hundred kilometers south of Abez—in the mining district.

A few hours later, on Yom Kippur 5708, we parted.

Hazak v'amatz! [Be strong and of good courage!]*—*the blessing traditionally used in the Movement had acquired a more current reality.

We went our respective ways to meet what awaited us in the north.

The transport reached Kirov, to a transit prison that from my standpoint had the peak number of fleas per prisoner (but after I experienced the Vologda transit prison, I changed its ranking).

From Kirov—north, to Inta.

On September 28, 1947, a year and one day after we were arrested, the commander of the convoy containing my carriage of prisoners handed me and two other prisoners over to two armed guards who awaited us at the Inta train station.

On a day in late autumn, under gray skies, our little procession trudged over muddy ground, to the sound of guard dogs barking somewhere in the distance. After a while a gray wood fence came into view ahead of us, topped with barbed wire—its fitting adornment. The ugly guard towers were manned by armed

guards. Next to the *vachta*—the large, wooden camp gate—was a narrow one through which we entered. This is where the guard captain and his soldiers are. My comrades and I each recited the chorus of his formula and the guard captain opened the barrier for us. Is this what was meant by the threat to our forefathers about “making your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass”?

■ ■ ■

I have undertaken to tell Mulka’s story.

From here on in, I must be rather cautious, however, because much of what will be said about him will be guesswork, intuition, speculation, and the like—all imprecise.

The knowledge I have accumulated is meager: too little to be adequate for anyone presuming to talk about someone else.

Ruth visited him twice in the camps where he was imprisoned. The story of her meetings with her brother helps in understanding his thinking, his responses, and the direction he was taking.

From my own experience, I believed that he was thinking and feeling as both of us had felt during our shared journeys, when we were going through the same things. I thought that his yearning, his steadfast desire, to get to *Eretz Yisrael* was exactly like mine. Of course the daily struggle he had to endure, the tactics he chose, the mistakes he made, the people he met, and how he was influenced by all of that—from my standpoint, it is all guesswork, and so my conclusions may be inaccurate. I cannot deduce from my own experience what Mulka’s might have been. Our environments, the circumstances of our lives, were different.

Are my evaluations and conclusions accurate and realistic? Hard to say. How tragic that there is no one to say with certainty that I am wrong, either.

And so I continue with my story, but now my steps are halting, as through a dark mist ...

The first time Ruth heard anything from Mulka after his arrest was from Petchora. Mulka wrote to her that he was in the prison hospital at this transit camp. Petchora, at the junction of the Petchora River and the rail line leading north to Inta-Vorkuta, was the center for a network of camps.

The impression this letter made on Ruth and Rudya was dismal. First they wondered whether he himself had written it, but the handwriting was indeed Mulka’s. He wrote about the “just sentence” they had given him, about his obligation to work hard now to atone for his crimes, to improve his direction and obey those in charge of him. At the end of the letter he hinted that he needed material help.

Ruth immediately bought the required necessities and sent them to her brother. The strange content of the letter had to be digested and made sense of: What had made Mulka write that way, about atoning for his “evil deeds”?

Mulka suffered from an abdominal condition which had bothered him since childhood, but even if he needed a doctor and certain kinds of food and hospitalization—as he had written—something in his letter suggested censorship, though not necessarily vis-à-vis Ruth. It was a message that he badly wanted to get across to the camp administration, and perhaps at Lubyanka too: The prisoner Yaffe has changed his behavior and hereinafter will “build his future” around remorse and atonement.

By the way, it was clear to both of us that our case would not simply be archived; it was full of matters of importance to the authorities, who would certainly wish to continue following developments, including verifying whether Zionist activity in the Baltic states and western Ukraine would continue.

From Petchora, Mulka was taken to Dzhan TUY, where he was stuck for a long time.

The rules forbade sending a letter from one camp to another. If, for example, I gave a letter to my camp’s mail supervisor, or left it in his mail box, the letter was checked by the censor, and if the address I had given on the envelope showed a prison camp, the letter would not be mailed—with no connection to its contents—unless the censor was drunk or drowsing. If somehow it arrived at another camp, the censor at that camp would hang onto it and not pass it on to the addressee.

This obstacle could be overcome via a mail carrier who was a free man—as long as he was reliable and willing to perform something prohibited.

In the correspondence between Mulka and me, there were long gaps, due mainly to the fact that we were both being moved around from place to place. It would take a long time until we managed to obtain one another’s new address, and until we found a useful opportunity to smuggle a letter out.

I searched for Kopel; I tried to make contact with him—but in vain. I thought that his prison camp name would be Kopel Skop, but instead the camps listed him under his borrowed name: Kopel Muravchek.

For about a month, Mulka worked in Dzhan TUY doing “general labor,” like digging and construction. After that, the work foremen began exploiting his experience in engineering, which he had studied at the Tashkent State Technical University and even in Moscow; and he had gained practical experience at the Riga port.

Early in the spring of 1948, Ruth decided to try to visit him.

Ruth ... Mulka’s sister was made from the same stuff as Mulka. This daughter from a good family knew how to work in the fields and around the grounds of the kibbutz training center in Latvia; on her way to Palestine, she had spent time in Italy and studied painting; once in Palestine, she studied at the Agricultural

School for Girls at Nahalal and then, with her core settlement group from the *Shomer Hatzair* in Latvia, she went to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee to establish Kibbutz Ein Gev. Like her comrades, she was not fazed by Arab harassment, the exhausting heat, the harsh conditions. When she fell ill, however, she went back to her parents in Riga; the war in Europe and the young doctor Rudya Yaakovson held her there. After the fighting started on the Russian-German front, she was with her husband and her baby son. Both of them ended up at a military hospital near the front—he as a doctor, she as a nurse.

Her determination and common sense, her rapid way of adjusting to situations that were not routine, and her knack for instant and effective decision-making were conspicuous qualities she had in common with her brother. Her impressive appearance, her inexhaustible energy and sense of purpose helped her in her dealings with people.

At the end of June, 1948, Ruth set out with two suitcases, food, and clothing—items not easy to “organize” in those days of scarcity.

She delayed a few days in Moscow with relatives and visited the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee which had not yet disbanded, trying to gauge the atmosphere there. She left when she realized that nothing useful would come from the committee.

While in Moscow, she had to see a woman who had returned from Petchora, whom Mulka—through hints in his letters—had asked her to meet. This visit clarified, for Ruth, her brother’s intentions.

I found her at the Baikal Hotel, across the Moscow River, after searching a long time. The hotel looked neglected; she was working there as a dishwasher. I was afraid. After a few minutes, another woman joined us, who had also come back from Petchora, and was working as a ticket-taker and conductor on the railway. They told me that Mulya, along with the son of one of the dishwashers and some girl from Azerbaijan, had decided to escape from the camp. The woman showed me the identity card she had prepared for her son. She suggested that, after I returned from my visit, we make a detailed plan to help the young men get away. When I asked her how she had obtained the identity card, she told me that during the time she was working as a night guard at a hotel, she had seen a drunk who had passed out. She took the ID card out of his pocket, removed his picture and substituted her son’s picture: The two were about the same age. She also said that the woman who works on the railway would soon be returning to Petchora, and that if the men did manage to escape the camp, they would know when she is working and could board the train, and she would help them get as far as Petchora, where they would change

clothes and go their separate ways.

Now I understood the intent of the sanctimonious letter he had written to me. Mulka knew that the letters are read by the censor and he wanted to mislead the camp management.

Ruth boarded the train and traveled for five days to reach Petchora. On the train, she saw and became acquainted with the people who use it: These were the “free” people who worked in the camps, plus some dubious characters who brought the goods used for profiteering, and a few other women who were journeying to see their imprisoned relatives. At Petchora, she needed to change trains in order to continue to the station at Mulka’s camp. The trains were packed, but Mulka had found a way to connect with the stationmaster and let him know that he was waiting for Ruth, and the stationmaster had duly arranged a place for her in the engine traveling to the camp. Two emissaries sent by Mulka, Japanese prisoners, helped Ruth with her suitcases. The young men told Ruth that her brother was looking well.

He was strong and full of energy. He made all kinds of arrangements for me and they even let me sleep in the little building near the gate. I went to the camp superintendant to ask permission to see my brother. The superintendant was a pleasant man, an officer who had been discharged from the army as a major. During the war he had been at the front, like my husband. I told him about our family. I added that I did not know what my brother had been tried for. I was very depressed by the harsh punishment they had given him. The superintendant explained that my visit was illegal; I would have to travel the four hundred kilometers back to the office in charge of camps and get a permit to meet with my brother. I explained to him that I only had five days and that I would just be wasting the time and not have time to see him. He relented. Apparently he was convinced that I was not involved in any of Mulya’s crimes. On the spot he gave me a permit to see Mulya. Before that I had seen him only through the fence. He granted Mulya two days off from work. The superintendant’s wife also received me very well. I was twice a guest in their house.

Seeing the prisoners and the harshness of the camp, Ruth found it all depressing. Prisoners’ families who came to visit them seemed very afraid. The camp personnel were, virtually all of them, thugs. They looked like criminals themselves. But she calmed down some during her stay, maybe thanks to the good impression she made on the superintendant’s family. She was able to rest a little from the rigors of the journey, and to prepare some decent food, and she was wise

enough to share with the guards who had helped her, literally, as hewers of wood and drawers of water. Incidentally, the people there did not believe that she was Mulka's sister. Everyone thought she was his wife. No one could imagine that a sister would make that kind of effort for her brother and would travel thousands of kilometers to do it.

Mulka told her what had happened to him since his arrest:

We sat together and he told me about the interrogation—a long and difficult story, which I had no idea of. He told me he had been in solitary confinement for a long time, and that it affected him badly. They questioned him day and night. The interrogators would change every six hours, and they would sit and eat right in front of him when he was hungry. He got two hundred grams of bread a day, and that was it. They did not let him sleep. They took his glasses away. They would shine a strong spotlight on him when he was already tired and worn out. They abused him, but they only beat him once, when they brought him to Moscow.

After that, Mulka got to the main point. He had made plans to escape. He wanted Ruth to send him civilian clothes and get him an ID card.

Meantime Ruth was looking around and trying to put together her own appraisal of the situation. She realized that chances of escape were nil. All the civilian personnel worked for the internal division of the NKVD and were eligible for rewards for turning in a prisoner trying to escape. She heard about an attempted mutiny that had taken place in the camp not long before, but the rebellious prisoners did not believe in their success, evidently, or it was just the nature of criminals—the rebellion ended with looting, they got drunk on vodka they found, and raped any women who crossed their path.

Ruth wanted to hire a lawyer to work on Mulka's situation, but realized that the prospects for rescuing him from camp were negligible. Mulka was determined to try to escape; he argued that if he had to spend many years in a prison camp, it would destroy him.

And then Mulya told me that there was another way to get out of the camp—not to eat until you were helpless, infirm. Then they would give him an aktirovka. But he promised me that he would not take that route ...

What was this “aktirovka”?

To “arrange an act” in Soviet bureaucratese is, generally, to set up an authorized committee, when needed, to check the quality of goods, products,

documents, etc. If the committee concludes that the subject of this check is not tradable or not required, or is spoiled and thus to be destroyed, it must formulate an appropriate document—an “*akt*”—stating the members’ conclusions and then, in their presence, the conclusions are implemented.

The process of destroying material that is unfit for use or is to be dumped is called *aktirovka*—and, needless to say, the process had more than once opened the way for seriously corrupt transactions.

To release Mulka from prison, on the grounds that he could not be physically rehabilitated under camp conditions, would have required convening an authorized investigation committee to include doctors and camp authorities, and the most influential member in terms of the final decision would have been a member of the security services. Should the committee reach an affirmative decision—to release the prisoner to the care of his family—the committee members would have had to prepare an “*akt*” detailing their reasons.

During various periods, the severity of the instructions concerning an *aktirovka* in the camps fluctuated, but generally the prisoner’s chances of being released in this way were close to zero.

What stopped millions of prisoners in the Nazi death camps from putting an end to their suffering? What is the logic of clinging to life under such circumstances, when the eventual end is almost inevitable? What kept them from refusing to go to work, and with one shot to the head end the beatings, humiliations, hunger, cold, filth, and work that was itself nothing but torture? Yes, yes, the guards never hesitated to carry out an order to kill—even to kill everyone. But what would the individual prisoner have lost by deciding that he had come to the limits of his ability to endure? What prevented him from deciding that he had had enough? Religious faith? The confidence that somewhere out there they were fighting—the British, Russians, partisans, Americans—and that one had only to buy time, to keep going for another day, another week? ...

What hope would a prisoner have, arriving at a camp in the Arctic north with a sentence of twenty-five years, meaning life? What if he is not a believer? And no one is out there fighting for him? Is anyone protesting this terrible injustice? Does anyone care? On the contrary, there are those who roundly applaud it. And as to those who preceded him in this terrible place and succumbed to the torture within a decade, did their fate move anyone? A prisoner for life, dragging his 25-year sentence along with him and entering the camp, seeing the loathsome world within its gates, knows that henceforth this life will also be his—until he breathes his last. Maybe it would be worthwhile to exchange this nightmare for a year, a month, even a week of liberty? Logic suggests that one has no chance of ever being released, nor of escaping. Where would one escape to? Even if you could overcome the very efficient guard system, what about the thousands of square kilometers of snow and mud all around? Only a single railroad line crosses this

wilderness, and it is watched and checked. Other routes are nonexistent; the natives living in the area belong to tribes of hunters, and the authorities pay them well for any prisoner they catch. The European population even gets generous gifts for hunting down escapees ...

Maybe attempting to escape is itself a form of suicide along with whatever profit it may bring, an attempt to earn an hour's life—and food that will quell one's hunger, to be with a woman even if the only way is by force, to get out of the labor convoy for more than just a day ... They'll kill you? So what? What's the point of life when it's not really living? Starved, humiliated, worked to the bone, contact with families and friends prevented, continual abuse, terror from the criminals, that and only that is your lot—why cling to life? Why not take the risk of flight, even if the odds are a hundred to one?

When you first get to the camp and take stock of the situation rationally, the idea of escape does not appear too crazy, since the loss is no loss. If the options are to go on living this way until you collapse, or dying in the course of an escape attempt—why not prefer the latter?

What did they agree between the two of them, the prisoner and his sister?

He really pressured me, and I saw that for someone so young to stay there for twenty-five years was awful. I could not refuse to help him, and I promised that I would get the ID card and would send civilian clothes. If he chose to go that route—I had to help him.

Ruth was shocked by what she saw of the camp. Possibly the things she saw with her own eyes influenced her to promise Mulka to stand by him and help him.

... The prisoners on their way to work are bound with heavy chains, two by two; barking dogs join the armed convoy which takes the prisoners to work; I saw one prisoner begging the commandant, crying bitterly and claiming that he can no longer do his quota of work and so now they are reducing his meager bread ration; how can he work? They ejected him from the commandant's presence: "Get out of here, lazy fellow, you'll go back into solitary if you don't meet your quota ..." I was shocked. A man crying and begging for a piece of bread ...

Ruth went back to Moscow sorely depressed. Although she understood the degree of danger lying in wait for her brother, she did not want nor could she expect counsel from her relatives, and she did not tell them her secret. In Riga, her husband and child were waiting for her.

■ ■ ■

Was it luck that came my way and turned my path to Inta? At Lubyanka they had already decided where each of us would be sent. Did Zimenkov and his friends have a hand in that? Mulka the “con man” went to a camp under the control of criminal prisoners whereas I, the evil spirit of the Zionist gang, went to the coal mines. I would learn, as the Russian saying went, “the price of a pound of trouble.”

I was put into a murky shack and I remained there to sleep, because it was already late. The next morning, I saw a prisoner moving around my bed. It was hard to miss his ethnic identification, and he left me no time to wonder about it anyway.

“A *Yid* (a Jew)?” he asked, and before I could manage to acknowledge it, he was showering me with questions. Every reply evoked another long series of additional questions.

I was one of the first to arrive at this camp with such a “fat” sentence. Because until recently, they had not meted out sentences of twenty-five years in political trials, many people thought I was pulling their leg and that my case was actually criminal. Underworld figures, curious, asked me whether I had robbed a bank or stolen a trainload of gray-market goods, since a Jew would likely be involved in pragmatic dealings of that nature. When they discovered that the “twenty-five” was under Article 58 of the Code, they asked whether I had tried to assassinate the man himself, meaning Joseph Stalin. I did not hide my past from my new colleagues. Usually the *bricha* story evokes a positive response from an audience. Smuggling people out of the country is an admired aim; it’s not a matter of anti-Soviet jokes, an area in which Jews are experts. Russians, Ukrainians, people from the Baltic states—they were all pleased that I had “showed them (the authorities)”, and Jews of course reacted positively.

Yitzhak Plotnik, the man who blessed my presence when I opened my eyes, gazed at my gaunt face and famished appearance, and announced that he had some *latkes* [potato pancakes] for me. I asked who had sent them to this shack for me and he explained that, whenever a Jew arrives at the camp, someone advises the veteran Jewish prisoners to go and welcome “theirs.” That is the custom, and maybe I had noticed that thief over there in the corner?—He was the one who had told him, Plotnik, that there was “a new one of yours” here.

Yitzhak Plotnik was most anxious to know what crime would get someone “25” these days. When I explained it to him, I felt that my stock had risen tremendously. He told me that he was originally from Poland. During the war, he had fled with his family to Russia. The authorities went after him for some profiteering and here he was, at Inta, where his time would be up in a few months. He was even allowed to leave the camp without a guard. His family, he continued, was already in Poland. “About a year ago, they set out for there and now I don’t get letters from them.” When he stopped talking, I glanced at his eyes and said, “Plotnik, are they already in Cyprus?”

The man almost fainted. “Do you know them? Have you heard anything of them?”

I explained that it was only conjecture on my part. What would they do in Poland? On the other hand, if they were heading for *Eretz Yisrael* across the Mediterranean, where would they be if not Cyprus?

I had hit the mark. The man had trouble recovering from his surprise at my good guess. My entry to camp as a prisoner under Plotnik’s wing was now assured.

“Come on,” he urged me, “come with me. There’s a Jew here you will want to see. Although he already goes outside the fence without a guard—*bezkonvoyny*—and tomorrow or the day after he will be released, but come on, this man has been in prison all his life.”

We went to one of the huts and found the man, and Plotnik said something to him. The man introduced himself as Lyuba Shkolnikov. Within a few minutes I learned that he was from Homel, in Belorussia, and when he confirmed to me that he was imprisoned for the third time because many years ago he had been a member of *Hashomer Hatzair*, I caught my breath. What symbolism!

I threw out the name of the emissary from Afikim who had been with us until the war, who was also from Homel, and received an affirmative: “Of course; I remember him.”

“I am also from *Hashomer Hatzair*. From Riga. You are being released? That’s wonderful. I came to take your place ...”

My welcome into the camp proceeded.

Plotnik did not leave my side. He introduced me to the who’s who of the camp, and I enjoyed considerable success as the representative of the new generation of twenty-fivers.

When I asked Plotnik what work I would be doing here, he mumbled a bit and then said that, in his opinion, I should not rush things. I had another 24 years to go, during the course of which I would be able to do all manner of work, if I was so eager. In his opinion, I ought to rest from the interrogations in Moscow, and today he would go and talk with the bastard from the clinic, the doctor—although he might only be impersonating a doctor—but because he’s from Poland ... Yes, I was right, he’s a Jew—he, Plotnik has no doubt of it, but I should not even hint at that to him, because this doctor wants people to think he’s a Pole—and he, Plotnik, is sure I will get a few days off, and then “we’ll see what can be done.” Over the twenty-four years that remained for me there, explained Plotnik, I could return any debt I thought I owed the camp management; I could even go down in the mines to work a few days, if I felt that I was living at someone else’s expense. And now to business—he, Plotnik, can sell some tobacco from the package that some relatives sent him, and in exchange he can buy some flour and

oil; after all, as I was aware, he knew how to make latkes, and clearly I needed to recuperate from my days in Lubyanka and from the journey on various trains, not exactly a pleasure trip. He, Yitzhak Plotnik, can swear—there’s no need even to look at my face. The doctor must be consulted (the one pretending to be a doctor)—“that Pole”—if I will excuse the term—and perhaps I can promise him something from the first package that I receive (surely I will receive packages, a Jew in the camp always receives packages from someone) and they will put me into the OP group, the initials stand for “recuperation group” in Russian, these are people who “wander around” the camp and do only very light work, and it’s also possible to avoid work entirely—he, Plotnik, knows the work coordinator, the *naryadchik*—in the twenty-four years I have left I will have time to do all the jobs, may the plague and the cholera strike them!—twenty-five! There is, by the way, another Jew here, from Poland, with twenty-five years like me. He also was involved in similar things. He’s connected with the disciples of some rabbi ... ”

Luck did not smile on Mulka as it did on me.

Not out of compassion did the Soviet authorities, after the war—in 1946, 1947—begin to somewhat rein in the treatment of prisoners in the camps (no, no, please do not measure these things using Dutch or Swedish yardsticks—these are Soviet standards). During the 1930s, and more so during the war years, when the mines were dug in Inta and they were laying the north-south railway, the prisoners were dropping like flies, as the old-timers put it, and they would bury them in snow-drifts along the railroad: The dead were not even identified on any lists. Most of the prisoners were city people, from the clerical strata and the intelligentsia, and they were stumbling around naked in the snow and laying the iron rails. Their energy source—depleted muscles; the food—a slice of bread or handful of flour and thin soup; the sleeping arrangements—in wobbly tents; the work site—the route of the railway, under the open sky; the task—to carry the railway ties on their backs, put them down properly in place and fasten them to the embankment.

There is no exaggeration in the common saying that “from Petchora to Vorkuta, every railroad tie lies on the body of a prisoner.”

After the war, the Soviet leadership—and perhaps even Stalin himself—realized that the Soviet Union did not have a large enough labor force to meet all the needs of an economy and infrastructure in ruins. Millions of men were killed in battle or died as prisoners of war; millions of wounded were unfit for heavy labor; millions were serving in the army and who could count how many were guarding prisoners and captives? Agriculture—well, the rural women would manage somehow and during the harvests, high school and university students and “volunteers” would come and perhaps help them; industry would get the students from technical high schools and the disabled; but who would fell lumber in the forests, who would go down into the mines and quarries, who would build the

underground railway for Moscow, who would set up factories in Siberia? Prisoners became greatly sought-after by those developing the wilderness and the frontier, setting up large enterprises, running the mines ...

In order for a man or a woman, a prisoner or not, to be useful to the state economy, they would have to be provided with a minimal ration of food, a bit of rest, clothing, a roof over their head, and medical care, if they would just produce something before their soul returned to its creator. No luxuries, heaven forbid. Food, did I say? Pardon me: calories. Rest? Let's say hours of sleep. Medical care? Prevention of epidemics. And again, bear in mind: We're not talking about Sweden or Benelux here, but in Russian terms, closer to home, to local tradition in the spirit of Ivan the Terrible or Peter the Great (and he was terrible, too).

Among the camp authorities, and probably also at higher echelons, a fierce debate was underway concerning the question of whether the emphasis should be on punishing the prisoner and making his life miserable—or getting the greatest possible use out of his muscles, which would require conserving his strength and preserving his life.

Those in charge of implementing the work programs in the Camps Administration argued for minimal conditions to enable their slaves to get to work fed and alert after a night's rest. Their mission sometimes led them to stand up for the workforce. The prisoner was not alone! Meantime, those representing the "regime"—the political commissars and their ilk—wanted order and discipline. For example, why not do a head count in the middle of the night, and make sure that every one of the four thousand, two hundred and forty-seven prisoners in the camp was present and accounted for, and that no one was missing? And if the count did not reconcile (usually that would be due to the inability of those in charge to deal with large numbers)—why, let'em be counted again—and all the prisoners would be assembled before the superintendant on the parade ground, in the bitter Arctic cold, and the count redone. And in the morning, the command would come: "To the gate! To work!"

And anyone who did not meet his quota—would find his bread ration cut, in fidelity to the sacred slogan that "anyone who doesn't work, doesn't eat!" And rightly so ...

The dispute between Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, Moscow version.

The lawlessness of the criminal filth and of their partner—the operational department of the camp directorate—was even restrained somewhat, though not for humanitarian reasons, heaven forbid, but to conserve the workforce. This, too, was not for long. The worry about what might happen if the strong arm of their taskmasters was not ceaselessly, and bodily, punishing the prisoners was quickly resolved with the establishment of a network of "special camps" for particularly dangerous political criminals—the *osoblag*—along the lines of the Nazi *konz-lager*,—a system inflated by the yeast of communist ideology.

I had my first taste of camp life during the waning days of a period ruled by the conviction that getting the most production from every prisoner was best achieved by the whip.

I tried to make contact with Mulka. When I wrote to Abez, I received no reply. I found out where he was from hints in the letters of family members in Riga, whose immediate material assistance enabled me to get through this period at all. Our correspondence was conducted cautiously and with great restraint. The overt part of his letters to me was meaningless and intended for the censor; in the coded part I found hints of plans to escape. Nothing more.

No, I was not able to dodge the forced labor. I tried; I tried shamelessly.

Although I lobbied my various connections and tried bribery too, I had to dig, and in the bitterest days of that cruel northern winter, with a brigade of other prisoners like me. We were ordered to embed white-hot iron poles deep into the frozen, stony ground, with the temperature around thirty degrees below zero and the wind blowing—dressed in tatters and wearing felt boots that never managed to dry out at night ... With the last vestiges of your strength, you would pound the heavy iron and barely scratch the ground ... Rest? You would freeze. Get warm? Only by hefting your pickaxe ...

To the physical suffering is added the discomfort of “what would the goyim say”—a whole brigade of fellows from all over the country, doing the same work I was doing but with much better success—who, because of “collective responsibility” in the brigade, shared equally with me the percentage of success we managed to squeeze beyond the norm, which would determine the size of our bread ration a day or two hence. To be a parasite ... it was so humiliating, to be unable to match your fellows, you who were raised in the spirit of kibbutz labor: “*ha ... avo ... dah heeee chaye ... nu* [wo..rk is our li ... fe]”

Nu, really. How could anything get done without *shira ba'tzibur* [group singing]?

The tribulations of the body and the soul ...

However, my friends in the camp move mountains and manage to rescue me from the brigade, who are not sorry to lose a “breadwinner” like me—and I am temporarily reassigned as a clerk working in the camp—indoors and with a stove nearby.

What will happen when this is over? Plotnik is not worried: “There are about a hundred Jews wandering around this camp who don’t work digging ditches, so with you here it’ll be a hundred and one.”

From Camp 7 came a representative of their entertainment troupe, who heard about my musical past, and wanted to know if I want to be their accompanist on the piano. They have an entertainment troupe for the free workers and for holiday performances.

“Yes, yes, I agree. All my life I have dreamed of these tunes ...”

This appointment demands authorization by the operations officer, who disqualifies me after a brief glance at my file, because of the relatively light guarding they do at Camp 7: “This man is liable to flee and to take a whole brigade with him ...” If only I could manage it ...

The vain temptation to attempt escape ensnares many a “patsy”, the inexperienced prisoner, and it hooks both me and my friend David Shtainvok, but we can recite *hagomel* [the blessing on deliverance from danger]: In exchange for a promise to get us to the center of the country, the scoundrels got away with money and valuables, but they left us our souls.

Yitzhak Plotnik is on his way. They will transfer him from one screened rail car to another as far as Brest, where he will be turned over to the Polish authorities. On a bit of cigarette paper, a centimeter square, as usual, I write using our code: “With this package I send one potential immigrant to Palestine, a single man, just a Jew without an organization ...”

He would have to report orally on what had become of us—Mulka and me—and I asked him to try and see my parents, if they are still alive ...

He would have to learn by heart and remember the address in Lodz and the name “Alexander.”

The tiny note was already sewn into the crease of his trousers. We say our farewells. The convoy takes future immigrant Yitzhak Plotnik from Inta on the first leg of his journey to Palestine

A strange feeling: After Vilna—to arrange for someone’s *aliya* from Inta, of all places ...

Engineer Weissbrem is a former prisoner. An honest, naïve man, untainted by the pollution in which the paths of this world are steeped, he finished his sentence at Inta, but was not able to return to Moscow, where he had lived before his imprisonment. They gave him a choice between Inta and some other remote place. So he stayed where he was and worked at his profession—planning and installing water tanks. Because he was looking for a draftsman to work with him on the construction of the local power plant, a meeting was arranged between us. Someone told him of my past. When I confessed to him that my drafting experience was acquired only during my high school geometry classes, he nodded his head and accepted me.

I began using the institutionalized means of evading the digging work. Only a direct order “from above” would move me into the ranks of the gulag proletariat. Thus I took on the despised aura of the parasites, known in the camps as *pridurky*—which translates roughly and inadequately as “bogus fools.”

One spring day I was told that I must prepare for the morrow “with my belongings.” In other words, they were taking me away from here. Where to? None of my friends had seen my file, and I couldn’t even guess why I was being moved from this camp, or who could need my presence elsewhere. Perhaps a new interrogation?

A prisoner in the camp can receive a newspaper via the “education and culture department” (Orwell again)—providing he has maintained good relations with the worker there, or found it proper to sacrifice for the purpose something from a care package sent to him. Indeed the radio hanging on the wall of the shack was chattering day and night, although the din in this shack was so loud, and the speaker so hoarse-sounding that you had trouble understanding the news and commentary, but you could guess the gist even before the broadcast.

From the Soviet media we knew that the government of the USSR declared itself favorably disposed to the struggle of the Jewish community in *Eretz Yisrael*. All the Jews in the camp followed the news from there. It was not hard to predict that some major disturbances were in the offing.

Perhaps there was some connection between the disturbances in Palestine and my being moved to somewhere else? Lubyanka? What would it be this time? Was Mulka, too, being summoned to wherever it was? The prospect that we might meet made it worth the trouble of being moved around. I was already an expert on the tourism services of the labor camps directorate.

When I wrote letters to my relatives in Riga—cautious letters, avoiding the main things, talking about my health being okay, about the work I am doing successfully, about my good friends—letters that are censored, and that must not embarrass the recipients—I would add a little note, a more innocent little letter, without a date or a location at the top—a letter that could be sent abroad as an addendum from a relative, who added at the last moment a few words to be polite.

These little notes were intended for my family, wherever they were; I hoped that from Riga, someone would send them to Palestine. And indeed, until the political situation deteriorated in the Soviet Union and the correspondence with people abroad became very dangerous, I would send regards in this manner to *Eretz Yisrael*.

My first letter from Inta was written in November of 1947, about two months after I arrived there and established contact with Riga:

Dear ones, Finally I have sat down to write to you. I suppose you have been worried about me, since you received no letters, although—as you see—there is no reason to worry. I am quite healthy and hope that you are well, too. There’s not much to write about me. I am getting along all right. Working in bookkeeping and it works out fine from an economic standpoint. The work is not hard and I am satis-

fied with it. That is more or less it, about me. I think of you a lot, my dear ones, and would like to know how you are managing, and whether you are working? How is the little one doing? "The little one" is already nearly ten, how time flies. I did not forget a few days ago to celebrate his birthday. And when you get this letter don't forget to give my warmest regards to your mother on her birthday. How is the older generation feeling? Forgive me for this brevity.

Be well, kisses to everyone, yours ...

The signature was crooked, not very clear, but at home they knew my handwriting. They could tell when the letter had been written, based on the content. All in all, seven of my letters from Inta reached Israel. I also received very brief replies, which I destroyed.

At the beginning of 1950, the situation in the Soviet Union was so tense that the "forwarding station" decided to stop all contact with Israel. Too dangerous.

■ ■ ■

I had already experienced a *Stolypin* railroad car. The route of the journey from the camp to Moscow coincided with the one I had already traveled, but this time in the opposite direction. I remained in the capital only long enough to be put into a different *Stolypin* carriage. The journey westward continued.

Maybe to Brest, and from there to Poland? Why Poland, for me? I'm not Plotnik. I'm a Soviet citizen by virtue of the annexation of Latvia to the Soviet Union.

The wild dreams that *Stolypin* is likely to arouse!

Somebody among the friends I made in passing between one jail and another, between one railway car and another just like it, somehow was able to view the first page of my file and bravely notified me that the destination was ... Minsk.

Minsk? Why would they want me in the Belorussian capital after Moscow had already investigated and come to a decision? Well, I would know when I got there.

Tired, worn down and hungry, I yearned to be in Minsk already and prostrate myself on my sleeping pallet in the prison there. My interrogation was over and there was nothing to worry about; all my chance acquaintances whom I had met on the way and who had heard about what I was convicted of, predicted that in Minsk I would be deported or sent to Palestine. The belief was very strong—especially among Jews—that the Soviet Union was standing firmly behind the Zionists in *Eretz Yisrael*, and the conclusion it led to was that the sworn Zionists would be sent there ... The rumors were persistent, the certainty befitting a transit lock-up where people have nothing else to do but analyze what the major powers were up to: Doubtless the Soviet Union was organizing Jewish volunteers to fight against the Arabs.

The Minsk municipal prison authorities did not choose to view me as a high-ranking representative of the new state, which came into being in the Middle East at around the same time. I was jailed as a leader of a gang of rabble comprising other political prisoners.

The conditions in this prison were very harsh. Crowding in the cells forced many to sleep on the floor when both levels of wall-to-wall platforms were full. The stifling heat, the sweat, the rotten food and stench of bodily wastes cancelled out my anticipation at meeting new people, some of them interesting. These were, in general, “collaborators with the Nazis”—real or imagined—and German officers and soldiers found guilty of crimes against the local population during the occupation. The Soviet authorities at the time intended to delay as long as possible the return of the German captives to their homeland, since they provided cheap and very disciplined labor that was greatly needed.

The real criminals had already been tried, three or four years earlier.

Why had I been brought there? Why to Minsk?

If the rationale was our work in Belorussia, they might bring Mulka, too ... Perhaps something had happened to Karpov? Only now, more than a year and a half after our imprisonment, did they remember him? He used to reassure us that if something happened to us, he would learn of it immediately and could get out to Poland ...

The time passed. No one could, or would, explain to me why I had been made to travel from Inta to Minsk. Questions to the duty officer, my written inquiry to the prosecutor dealing with prisoner complaints—were rewarded with no reply. I thought that perhaps Mulka was sitting in some other cell in the same jail. With the help of my cellmates, I tried to find out, through other cells on the floors used for “politicals.” The replies were negative.

Concerning the question of *Eretz Yisrael* and the involvement of the Soviet Union in the Arab-Jewish conflict, the level of confusion among the general, free population is evident from an incident with the prison doctor.

This is what happened: The duty officer would do his rounds of the cells every morning, and when someone complained about his health, the officer would report it to the doctor.

Lying day and night on the platforms in the cell, with no room to stand or walk around, was increasingly troublesome. The prisoners took advantage of very exercise hour to get out of the cell and move around. One morning, I complained of headaches and the duty officer wrote my name down.

My status in the cell was good. Among the prison population already past the interrogation stage, sentenced to periods of ten to twenty-five years’ imprisonment and awaiting transport to camps in the east or the north, I was nearly the only one who already had experience in an actual camp, so it was only natural

that I became a kind of consultant lecturer on the subject of what a prison camp is like, and how to survive in one. I was also asked to talk about other subjects that interested the local population, such as events in the Middle East, why the Germans hate the Jews, what the Jewish religion is, and why the Jews don't want to be Christians "like everyone else." The listeners were mostly people who had collaborated with the Nazis during the occupation, and even they had been amazed at the outbreak of violence against the Jews. For some of these people, considering what they had done, the worst possible punishment would have been fitting; but apparently many others, even according to Bet Shammai, ought not to have been brought to trial at all.

What I knew of the prison doctor was that she was married to the operational officer—not much of a recommendation in the eyes of the prisoners.

At midday, a guard took me to the clinic. Usually the prisoner would go into the clinic while the guard waited in the corridor, at a little distance from the open door, in case the patient went wild or tried to hurt the doctor.

When I entered the clinic, and gave my full name and other identifying details to the doctor in the usual way, she raised her head, stared at me for long moments and said with hatred laced with contempt: "You? You should not have been placed in that cell!"

I had no doubt what she meant: I, a Jew sitting in a cell with political prisoners—for what, if not for collaboration with the Nazis, was I accused of? Obviously I had been one of the hangmen who had turned in others of my own people—and received twenty-five years for collaborating with the enemy.

I replied that she was mistaken. It was most appropriate for me to be in that cell.

Embarrassed, she looked at me in amazement. There was a little silence in the room.

I repeated myself and emphasized again that it was very appropriate for me to be in that cell.

Despite the prohibition against discussions of this kind between free staff members and the prisoners, her curiosity won. "Why," she was unable to restrain herself from asking, "Why were you arrested? What did you do to get such a severe sentence?"

"I sent Jews to Palestine—to work there and to fight when the need arose."

The woman was astounded. For a few moments she was speechless; then, recovering, she asked: "They punish people for that? That is a crime? In the newspapers ... they say that it is even permitted to volunteer ..."

This was not the time to explain to her what she had not managed to learn during her lifetime thus far ...

"I did not think it was like that. I would not have believed that they put people in prison for that ... Twenty-five years!"

She went through all the obligatory negatives. She prescribed some pills for me and sent me back to my cell.

The next day I got the medicine and the doctor also put me on the list to get extra food. On a doctor's orders, they would add two hundred grams of bread and another portion of soup to an ill person's daily ration.

That was not the end of that particular incident.

I was sick and tired of the Minsk prison. Even the camp was preferable. My helplessness was also irritating. Humiliated, I rebelled against the idea that "they" had me in their clutches and could do with me just as they pleased.

Was it only the unbearable conditions in the Minsk prison? Or was it also the fact that they treated you like an inanimate object or a pet, dragging you thousands of kilometers all over the map, with no explanation, under conditions that even in Soviet terms were inhuman—yet they saw no need to explain why, as if your being a lifer gave them the right to do whatever they want with you?

Meanwhile they moved me to a cell with only five prisoners in it.

Again I approached the duty officer and forcefully demanded an explanation as to why and pursuant to whose instructions I had been dragged to Minsk. I added that the decision of the "Secret Committee" spoke of my imprisonment in camps, not in a prison, and who had dared to contravene the instructions of that institution?

My questions—rhetorical, naturally—were not answered. One morning when I had been in the new cell about two days, I gave back my morning bread ration and announced that I would refuse to accept food until someone gave me some answers.

What has a prisoner to lose—his chains?

This was in July, on a Thursday or a Friday.

Hunger strike. The prison authorities do not like hunger strikes, but they pretend not to care.

The prisoners advised the guard that someone in their cell was on a hunger strike. A few minutes later, the duty officer appeared and tried to dissuade me from striking with the excuse that he has no one he can ask so early in the morning about why I was brought to Minsk. I replied that I could wait and refused to accept my food ration.

Nothing passes as slowly as the time in prison, so that hunger has an immediate and powerful impact, as though it were lying in wait in the corner, perhaps because, on the days when you are eating, you are hungry anyway.

I tried to steady myself, to dampen my elation: Really, what's the point of destroying yourself? Why be in such a hurry to return to the camp? You're in the lap of luxury there? They violated your sacred rights? Really ... At every turn

they humiliate you and embitter your life, keeping you in conditions that would lay low even an animal, and to all that they added another injury: They did not notify you why and for what purpose they brought you here? ... Maybe there was some mistake? And if so? Will you demand a trial? Is there anything new about their treating you in a completely arbitrary way? And on the other hand, why am I obliged to accept their judgment? Isn't there any way to fix some point as the "this much and no more", like people do in books? Okay then; a hunger strike. Who will care? Will a journalist come to interview you? Are you in France, or maybe Norway? Will the prosecutor have trouble sleeping tonight? No one outside the walls of this prison knows or has heard a thing about this strike you declared—and possibly there is no one who wants to hear ... You have disappeared—and that's that. If your guards want to, or are ordered to, they can murder you with a shot, or drown you, or poison you, or hang you—no one will know. There was a man—and see, now there isn't ... Supposing the decision to go on a hunger strike was hasty, or even stupid. Aren't you allowed to change your mind and request food? Why not? Why? Because there has to be an opening, a valve to vent the accumulated rage against the lawless way they treat people ... if everyone is silent ... maybe my example ... Aha, here are the harbingers of prestige! Some leverage for a little preaching at the gates ... teaching the Soviet citizens how to relate to a prisoner's rights ... Prisoners applaud, Lavrenti Beria wandering around wakeful at night, tense with the expectation of a chance to learn something about prisoners' rights ... They'll starve you, you'll collapse—and they'll throw your carcass in a dungeon—who's to know? Even your cellmates won't know. And if they did—so what? They'll telegraph Ben Gurion? You're sitting in a country surrounded by a wall—and on the inside, there's another wall, the Ministry for State Security—and within that, a stinking, out-of-the-way jail cell in Minsk—one of a thousand, one of many thousands! Who knows what goes on in one of the cells of the Minsk prison? And who cares? You want to waste away? Go ahead!

The logical conclusion is that the announcement of this hunger strike will mean capitulation and downfall. A hunger strike that has no vocal and supportive public following is doomed to failure. Even a baby knows that.

Really? Then why don't they like hunger strikes? Why does the guard come three times a day and advise you—even pressure you—to eat? Logic would dictate the opposite—they should just kick you and wait for your capitulation or the smell that will rise from your corpse ...

Maybe it's your taking initiative that bothers them, because it might be contagious and start the others on taking initiatives of their own ... They would like to announce your hunger strike themselves. They and only they are permitted to kill you ... Showing initiative—even about your own fate, your own body—is outside your authority; that, too, is their sole right.

If Mulka is here, in prison—has he also gone on a hunger strike?

I don't think he would have initiated a futile exercise. His actions always had a defined, concrete goal. Perhaps he would have said: "What will you gain by this? You will endanger your health—and what will you get from them in return? And even if you succeed, and get a response?"

My cellmates tell me that today is Sunday ... which means it is the fourth day of my strike. Or the third? I'm getting weaker. I have trouble getting up to relieve myself. The others help me to wash my face.

The guard comes into the cell and comes over to the platform I am lying on.

What now? In the morning and afternoon he opens the hatch, holding the tray with my bread ration and a plate of soup, and asks if I will accept the food. What now?

Yes, he is asking me again, and before I can even reply, he opens the door and brings in a colleague who was standing outside in the corridor. They haul me to my feet and we leave the cell. A strange procession: Two guards holding my arms and supporting me, and we progress slowly. Are they taking me to isolation? If today is Sunday, senior staff are not here ... Is this an initiative of the guards? Just a beating? They're bored? Maybe they are taking me to solitary? Maybe the neighbors wanted to be rid of me—they don't want to eat in front of me?

We are at the clinic. The furniture, the white sheets demonstrate that. They lie me down on a rigid couch. Ah, here is the doctor, the woman who suspected me of collaborating with the Nazis ... If they beat me—she will decide when to stop it, with her hand on my pulse.

The doctor explains that my condition is worrisome and wants to know if I will eat the food on the plate. I did not notice that there is a plate on the table, with a thin semolina gruel. I was surprised—I have no appetite ... I explained to her that I declared a hunger strike because ... it's my right to know ... She interrupted me and explained that today is Sunday and there is no one to talk to. She is taking a rotation. She promises that tomorrow ... She does not want, during her rotation ... responsible for the health of ...

I can no longer hear her. A wave of fury, which began somewhere in the lower part of my stomach, rises up into my throat—and I rant and rave about my rights, about her hypocrisy and those who sent her and their talk of worry about the health of prisoners ... She belongs to the gang of hypocrites ... I see her face flush; is she angry, or what? She bursts out, "I have no choice. I must feed you," and she gestures to the guards, turns her back and goes over to the window ... She does not want to see how they treat her patient?

The two of them had trouble overcoming me. They laid me down on the couch, and one of them held both my arms—although it never occurred to me to struggle with him—and one put a rubber spoon into my mouth and poured soup

into me. I choked and swallowed; a time out—and again choked and swallowed. He fed me slowly, professionally, but my shirt was stained and my face awash in soup.

They finished. They sat me up, wiped my face ... the woman was still looking out the window ... The stood me up and walked me into the corridor ... In the cell, they laid me down on my platform and left.

My neighbors eagerly soaked up my story. The days in that cell were so boring—now something had happened ...

And in my stomach—a strenuous battle. It hurts, it hurts a lot ...

After a little while, the hatch opened and some officer explained to me:

“You are in the Minsk prison pursuant to instructions of the military tribunal of the Belorussian military district. You were brought here as a witness in a trial that is about to begin. They are waiting for additional witnesses to arrive. Is that clear?”

“Yes, it’s clear.”

“Now will you take food?”

“I will.”

The hatch closed. A few minutes later, it opened again. A junior officer peeked through the opening; he had my ration of bread and soup. “The doctor said you should not eat it all at once, but slowly. With intermissions.” The hatch closed.

So ... They will try Karpov ... The military district of Belorussia. Karpov, surely Karpov. Who else? How was he caught?

Who are the witnesses whose arrival they await? Without a doubt, Mulka will be one of them. He used to meet with the accused. The last time was on the day we were arrested.

I figured that the doctor had received the report of my hunger strike while on her rotation duty. After she fed me she approached her husband, the operational officer, and asked for the information the absence of which was my reason for declaring a strike ... What was it to her? Maybe she is the one who wears the pants in that family; that’s how it looks to me ... Then she ordered the duty officer—or made her husband order him—to pass the information along to the hunger striker.

I didn’t know that I had *blat* [pull] in the Minsk prison.

I had not a shred of doubt remaining as to why I had been brought to Minsk. I was brought before two investigators who asked me a few general questions about Karpov. Their task was to verify, apparently, that I was indeed a witness with information required by the tribunal.

I knew that I would be unable to help the accused.

At the time of our arrest, Mulka and I had false documents signed by Karpov,

and these were placed in our interrogation file. I had no idea how Karpov had defended himself—perhaps some excuse could be found for him, some way out of the mess he was in, but I did not know what he thought might save him. Any version I offered—so long as it did not match Karpov's—would only do damage. It would be better if I did not testify at all. I could claim that I did not know him, but they already knew I did.

Finally they notified me that the next day I would go before the tribunal.

Before I left the cell, a few prisoners asked me to try to smuggle their letters out of the prison. The letters written and sent via the prison were censored and then took a long time en route. I took the letters and put them in a private place on my body.

The military tribunal in Minsk convened in a building not far from the prison. The guards would first collect all the witnesses from their various cells, using a list they'd been given, and then move them to the other building. I assumed that I would meet Mulka in the prison vehicle, although I heard that the vehicle had already left. I remained alone in the transit cell.

For some reason, I was taken on foot by three guards through the noisy street—an armed soldier in front of me and another behind me, and the third—the officer in charge, who had a pistol—at my left side. Passersby gazed curiously at the bespectacled criminal marching under heavy guard. I did not know why I was being moved separately, but the walk was actually quite pleasant.

We got to the military court building. The guards accompanied me to the second or third floor, they brought me a chair and told me to set it against the wall and sit down on it, facing the wall. Two soldiers took up positions behind me, automatic weapons at the ready.

I understood that the trial had already begun and that the guards were waiting for the judge to tell them to bring me into the courtroom. Inwardly I had already decided not to cooperate with the tribunal. Any evidence I might give, no matter what, could only spoil things for Karpov. Lost in my thoughts, I noticed suddenly in front of me a weeping woman with an infant in her arms. Surprised, I wondered who she was. How could the guards have let her come so near to me? What did she want from me?

"I am Katya. Karpov's wife. You can save him. Only you ... Have mercy on us, on our children ... please ..."

Karpov's wife! She had managed to approach me ... I had never seen her before, but I knew that she was always kind to our comrades. How could I help her? Could anyone?

Such is a woman's power that she was able to persuade the guard to allow her to approach me! Maybe I'm wrong to see the soldiers as spawn of the devil?

I murmured something ... I knew that Karpov's fate was already sealed. I was sure that the next twenty-five years were already set for him, a senior officer and

Party member who had maintained contact with a Zionist gang, in breach of trust, corrupted ... I felt rage boiling inside me at their forcing me to participate in convicting Karpov. Leave me out of it! This trial that is no trial, and the system, and bringing me from beyond the dark mountains—screw them! I will not play this game they are proposing ... Do it without me!

I did not know what I would do in front of the judge. I could not save Karpov in any case. But I would not avoid a confrontation. Solitary? So let it be solitary. At most I would spend a fortnight there. Good for me. “Happily, I am an orphan”—they could add nothing to the twenty-five years I already had been given.

This desire, this urge to stand up and hit back, to create an uproar, to expose the lie represented by this court ... although Karpov’s case is not optimal for this—but “they” have no right to prosecute him ...

There was no need to pour oil on the fire already burning within me; probably better to confine it than to fan it, lest I say things in the heat of the moment that I would later regret ...

Who was I to Karpov, or Karpov to me? Had we not advised him to flee? Why had he not listened to us? Why? What an idiot!

The soldier touched my shoulder. I was lost in thought. His comrade had disappeared. I stood up and walked with him as he held onto me with one hand, his weapon in the other.

A boy; how old was this boy who was guarding me? So innocent ...

The soldier brought me into a very spacious courtroom, found me an empty seat, told me to sit down, and stationed himself behind me. In front of me, about five meters away, was a broad table behind which sat a bespectacled colonel from Russian intelligence, with a kind, calm face. He had a friendly gaze, this colonel. Where do they still find people of this type? And how do they force them to do this contemptible sort of work?

To his left sat a guy looking indifferent, and the other way, on a low dais, sat a repulsive-looking major. The prosecutor, no doubt. Also at the long table were a couple of secretaries and to my right I saw a rustic youth, not very impressive. That was the defense attorney, with his assistant sitting next to him. On the defendants’ bench, to my left, I saw Karpov first. His face was sunken, his hair wildly overgrown, his face unshaven. There were a few more people in the courtroom, perhaps family members.

The chairman—the *polkovnik*—ordered me to stand and explained that I was a witness in the trial of Ivan Karpovich Karpov and that in my testimony I should tell the tribunal the truth. He cautioned me that if I deviated from the truth, I would be punished—with up to three years’ imprisonment! I smiled. I went over to the secretary and signed a declaration that I was familiar with the content of the Belorussian criminal code dealing with the obligations of a witness.

They began with my identification—name, father’s name, family name and all

the rest, including the sentence I was now under. When the chairman asked me whether I knew the accused, I replied in the negative. This was the truth, since I had never had any direct contact with Karpov. The chairman paid no attention and asked—quietly, courteously—that I tell him whatever I knew of Karpov.

I told the chairman that I had an announcement for the court, and when he asked in his calm voice that I state it, I said that I did not mean to give any evidence at all regarding Karpov.

The chairman asked, “Why?”—and the prosecutor sat up in his chair and asked the same question. I replied that I did not want to respond. There ensued a dialogue between me and the chairman, familiar to me from my days under interrogation:

“Why do you not wish to testify?”

“I do not wish to explain because I do not want to, and that’s all, and I refuse to discuss it or answers questions about it, and I have no response ... ”

The prosecutor got very upset. The atmosphere in the courtroom became tense. The chairman sought to diminish it, saying that perhaps because of the severe punishment meted out to me, I was harboring a grudge or grievance against the authorities. However, “I don’t want to” was a response to the question with no need for further meanings to be attributed to it.

After some discussion that did not advance the negotiation between me and my adversary, he produced a thick file, which I identified as my interrogation file, opened it, and said: “In your interrogation on such-and-such a day, as recorded in the transcript, you said that you had in your hand a document for exit to Po ... ”

Again I interrupted him: “I have a further announcement for the court.” The chairman asked to hear it, and then I told him that in my interrogation in Lubyanka, I had defended myself and in so doing I had lied and implicated innocent people, hence what I said then cannot serve as evidence.

The tension grew.

The prosecutor lost his temper and shouted at me that I had appended my signature to show that I had been cautioned that I must speak the truth and ...

I interrupted him, too. I told him that the court has the right to try me on those grounds, that I had only just now signed, and that there was certainly a deficiency there ...

Hearing these things, the defense attorney began shouting that perhaps I had falsely libeled his client, which was a crime under Article such-and-such ...

I asked him to add that article to the list of my crimes ...

There was uproar in the courtroom. The secretaries began laughing hysterically. The prosecutor and defense attorney were enraged. The chairman hushed them, silenced them, and then turned to the soldier standing behind me and commanded him: “Remove the witness!”

I got up and walked out the door, with the soldier behind me. In truth, I was somewhat agitated myself. My hands trembled and I could barely get out the door—I would not have believed that the performance would go so well. I had no doubt that it would “cost” me two weeks in solitary and that a recommendation would go into my personal file from the high court to the labor camp administration to punish me and enter the incident into my file.

The soldier took me down to the ground floor and put me into the cell for prisoners waiting their turn to appear in court or return to prison.

I sat on a bench. The waves of emotion that had overwhelmed me subsided. I calmed down. The hatch opened. The soldier gestured to me with a finger to come toward him. He looked at me a long time and asked in a whisper: “They gave you twenty-five? Really?”

I nodded my head, adding: “You heard ...” as though a sentence like that were an everyday thing.

The young soldier looked at me and said: “You did a good thing, not to sell out that man ...”

When the vise that closed around my throat loosened again, I murmured something about how it’s forbidden to betray our friends, forbidden to “sell out” a comrade ... The young man stuck his head in the hatch and whispered: “Because of our red epaulets, in the street they call us ‘sons of bitches’ and other dirty names ...” His voice showed how much he was wounded by this. I felt that I had to encourage him: “They’re the fools. They’re fools, and they don’t understand what they’re saying. I don’t say things like that to you. Now you’ve been conscripted; you’re a soldier. Just don’t add to people’s burdens. Don’t do bad things to them—and don’t pay attention to what those fools say.”

I repeated these sentiments and added: “I think that you are a kind young man.”

What is this? I’m playing the part of Lev Tolstoy here?

Suddenly I remembered: The letters!

“I have a few letters here, that friends of mine in prison asked me to send to their families. Could you put them into the mailbox? Just don’t let anyone see you ...”

He held out his hand.

“Thank you very much, young man! Thank you ...”

The tribunal took a recess while the fate of the accused was decided. Karpov was brought to the prisoners’ cell. The man fell on me, hugging and kissing me.

“It was only your testimony I was afraid of. Only yours. All the rest was nothing much. Nonsense.” And then he said that he had always known that “with Jews, it’s different—they don’t turn in their friends.”

I asked him about the “nonsense,” as he put it, and it turned out that he had a

whole jackpot behind him, run by others. They could not be compared with the scope of our campaign, but I got the impression that he was deceiving himself. The tribunal could do without my testimony. The *corpus delicti*, the evaculists he had signed, were displayed right there in front of the tribunal ...

When I asked him how he had defended himself when they accused him concerning our people, he told me that he had rationalized his behavior on the grounds that our people provided him with documents that justified the issuance of exit permits—but “to his regret,” there had been a fire in his office and everything was destroyed. It was a pathetic excuse, easily refuted. Every excuse I could find myself was refuted immediately by the defendant.

When I asked him how he had been caught—since he had been so sure that he would know right away if we were jailed—he told me that he had indeed found out right away, but he preferred to get out of there ... to Moscow. He spent seven months in the capital city, “diminished” the considerable funds he had to hand, and when he was left without a cent, he went back ... and where would he go back to, if not to Katya and the children in Baranovich?

That same night, they arrested him.

It was sad to see his innocent faith that his punishment would be moderated thanks to his high military rank and his time with the partisans. I tried to prepare him for a severe sentence. I thought he would probably get the “wholehearted” deal, i.e., twenty-five years, or perhaps fifteen, but he talked confidently about being exonerated. “Your testimony would have convicted me, but the Soviet authorities know how to appreciate dedicated people ...,” he said; from there, he insisted, he would go home ... they would give him back his uniform ...

He was called back to the courtroom and after a few minutes returned to the cell. His eyes had a wild look in them. He was stunned: “Ten!” They had given him ten years.

It was hard to see him cursing and cursed, and even harder to see his wife, hysterical and weeping bitterly: “What have you done to me? Where will I go with the children? There is nothing left even to sell from the house ...”

She too had been sure that, after my refusal to testify, she would be welcoming him home with flowers.

I did not doubt that I had helped Karpov avoid a heavier sentence.

The next morning, I was sent “home” from Minsk. To Inta.

I was not punished for the disgrace at the tribunal. I was sure that that same *polkovnik* was the one who had taken pity on me. And another thing: From a prisoner who was a cellmate for part of the time in Minsk and afterwards came to Inta, I heard that Katya had sent me a food package; while I was gone, it had been returned to the sender.

Now it was this poor woman’s fate to send packages to her husband.

In time, I understood the meaning of the foot-dragging and the postpone-

ment of the trial, which had led me to declare a hunger strike in the Minsk prison. The trial was postponed because Mulka—who was supposed to be the key witness in the Karpov affair—was not found! They simply did not find him!

The bureaucracy was at fault.

Mulka became ill on the way north, and though en route to Abez he ended up at Dzhanaty. The clerk who forgot to report that, or the one who was negligent and did not record the change of destination in Mulka's file, or the officer who did not report it to Moscow—may they be blessed! They saved Mulka the terrible journey to Minsk and back.

I was disappointed, though, at having missed out on seeing him.

The trans-Siberian train leaving Moscow for the Pacific coast arrives in Chita, near the border of China and Mongolia, after a journey of 6,704 kilometers. On the way, it crosses the Ural Mountains separating Europe and Asia, stops in the large Siberian cities of Omsk, Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, and Ulan-Udeh, bypasses the enormous Lake Baikal, famous for its beauty, great depth and ancient origins—and only then stops at Chita.

About two-hundred and fifty kilometers east of Chita are Shilka and Nerchinsk, Prisknaya and Saransk—towns whose names are said in the same breath as notions like *katorga* (the pre-Bolshevik name for penal labor) and expulsion and labor camps—whether in the days of the Tsars or their heirs.

Balei—where Mulka was taken—is also on that list.

There is nothing new in the assertion that the force of the repressive policies of the Soviets—or the Nazis—may be estimated as a function of the frequency of the trains carrying prisoners in the typically crowded conditions of those trains

...

Tired and hungry—after a journey of horrors in “Bread-Meat” wagons and the nauseating *Stolypin* railroad cars, packed to the gills—via Moscow, Vologda and Kotlas—I returned to Inta as a kind of homecoming, with the hope of regaining my strength, having a decent wash, and donning clean underwear.

Camp 4 at Inta, however, which I had painted in my imagination as a luxurious rest home, I found closed to me. In my absence, Inta had begun reorganizing as a Special Camp—an *osoblag*—“a series of harsh discipline camps for especially dangerous political prisoners.” Thus, evidently, they were described.

Stalin envied Hitler his actions and his efficiency, particularly in terms of the system of camps his ally-enemy had so perfected.

Since 1946, or a year after that, the security services had begun a nationwide screening of political prisoners, who were referred—some to the *osob* and some to the “general” camps, together with the criminals, among whom there was also no shortage of pointless victims of an insane economic policy.

(On my return journey from Minsk, I met during a transfer from one train to

another a fourteen-year-old boy who had been sentenced to eight years in prison for having broken into a neighbor's apiary and gorged on the honey he found there, and a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old girl, sentenced to five years in prison for having stolen from the factory where she worked "four hundred meters of woven material," when in fact it had been a few spools of thread.)

One may assume that the *osob* was destined in future to become an extermination camp—we heard it more than once from an officer—especially the officers in charge of "operational" actions—the direct representatives of the MGB (Ministry for State Security) in the camps: "You will never leave here" ... Indeed as the 1940s were ending, the authorities had not yet relinquished the camp prisoners as an excellent pool of available labor.

Classification of political prisoners was done clandestinely by the security services in the camps. What the criteria were, I don't know; clearly, there was a certain degree of happenstance involved. Mulka was sent to a general camp; I, to the *osob*, although the two of us were found guilty under the same articles of the code, were part of the same case, involving the same matter, and we had the same level of education.

Anyone who was there can testify that, along with sworn enemies of the regime, the *osob* also housed many who were caught up in this horror by accident, including people who barely knew how to read and write, who did not know their left from their right in politics, and who had no clue why they had been given such inhuman and severe sentences. There were also many inmates from the most excellent populations in the state, and alongside them, although in the minority, the sort of criminals that in every advanced nation belong behind bars. It can be argued that, generally, the regular camps were drained of the element of education and conscience, while the *osob* network absorbed it.

If not for fear of the plan to eventually exterminate the inmates of the *osob*—a fear not without foundation—my choice as between the ordinary camps and the *osob* as a place to serve out my endless sentence, would have been the *osob*—notwithstanding the oppression and repression and the heavy-handed punishment both individual and collective, and the long workday, and the inability to correspond regularly, and the humiliation of bearing a number on every article of clothing, and on and on ...

All of that was true until 1951-1952. At that point we began clearly sensing the approaching extermination like a feeling of impending asphyxiation; the loopholes in the system were closed off; oppressive pronouncements became more acute and overt. At the beginning of 1953, all signs suggested that we would not escape—certainly not us, the Jews—from the Stalin-Beria model of "final solution," since "it is not your labor we are interested in, but your suffering ...," as the senior officers in the camp were heard to say. On the thirteenth of January, 1953, insanity finally took over, with publication of the alleged Jewish doctors' plot

against the leaders of the state, with the intention of poisoning them ...

During those years, no satisfactory information reached me from Mulka or about him. Our correspondence was random and I was sure that most of our letters were lost en route. Ruth had to be cautious in writing—a connection with a “dangerous criminal” like him was liable to be her undoing, even if she was his sister. After the sudden death of her husband Rudya, from a heart attack, any careless step could have left the children without their mother, too.

The changes that came about in my life after my return from Minsk were traumatic. Instead of the friendly and known company in Camp 4, I found myself in a transit camp, where every day dozens of prisoners, and sometimes hundreds, arrived and departed. Some of them were underworld figures with serious criminal backgrounds.

From all the camps in the Inta region, criminal prisoners—and political prisoners not bound for the *osob*—flowed into Camp 4, to be sent on from there to somewhere among the manifold and far-reaching branches of the kingdom of the gulag. Inta was meant to be an “exclusive” camp belonging to the *osob* network and even had a special nickname, as did each of the camps in that network: *migeral-lag*, or *miglag* for short.

The transit camp where I landed had a temporary feel to it. The criminal prisoners had the upper hand and they left their mark on everything. The six months that I spent there were terrifying—danger lurked in every corner; murder, extortion and blows were routine. The work laying rail lines involved a physical exertion beyond my capacity to produce. Then I moved to shoemaking—a craft for which I had no great skill. It was a great relief when I was finally moved to Camp 1 of the *miglag*, which was, so to speak, my natural place. At that camp, which had been built next to a large coal mine, I found friends and companions, among them Yisrael Tzemach, a *Betar* member from Latvia, who had been victimized by an act of provocateurs not long after the war broke out—when a Soviet agent offered to help smuggle him across the border to Iran on his way to Palestine. We developed a real partnership in our everyday lives; after a few weeks of going out to work at random jobs, Yisrael was able to find both of us a “warm corner” of our own in bookkeeping—work that no one really needed done—so that we could spend our time reading and talking with people whose company enriched and entertained.

Yisrael was supposed to be freed in the near future and this ought to have worried him, since in those days the release of an “*osoblag* graduate” had a special meaning of its own. When the time came, Yisrael was taken by a regular guard detail with other prisoners—some also being freed, others being moved to a different prison—and put on a *Stolypin*. After the usual tortuous journey, a group of prisoners to be released was brought to the Krasnoyarsk prison in the heart of Siberia, where they were kept for a time. Then they were taken to a forest, in the

most remote and inaccessible location, and instructed as to the area where they were permitted to live—these free men—within a radius of about ten kilometers around a designated central point in the wilderness there; and these free men were ordered to report on specified dates to the regional superintendent, or else be taken into custody again from their release location and punished again with many more years' imprisonment in the *osoblag* ...

These free citizens were now to work at producing pitch from trees. The pay was by quota; they had to build their own living quarters ("Here are tools!")—after all, there was no shortage of wood in the forest. Basic provisions? Periodically someone would arrive to distribute flour, salt and matches; periodically the man in charge of the mobile store would show up, to offer cologne, children's toys, and sometimes sandwiches ... And kindly remember: Absenting yourself from that place without permission from the regional superintendent was considered equivalent to a prison break, and that meant being returned to the *osob* camp with a new release date, and beware what might come ...

This sort of release, of course, became a nightmare. It was better in the regular labor camp, with four or five thousand people, where a prisoner could find friends, even find work that he could manage to do, and could be sure that if he were laid low—someone would find him a doctor.

There were prisoners who cursed their "release."

In the Baley prison, where Mulka was, things were also changing at that time. The more highly educated prisoners, people of an intellectual and moral caliber similar to Mulka's, were being moved from there to the *osob*. It wasn't that only loathsome, repulsive types were left in the general prisons; but Mulka's example shows clearly that the general camps were being emptied of the leavening in the dough and rendered cultural and social wastelands.

From what Ruth said, it appears that Mulka became more and more withdrawn as time passed, staying indoors and alone, reviewing his plans to escape as he felt the walls closing in on him. Due to the technical-administrative nature of his work in construction, he was able to concentrate and go deeply into the subject, far beyond what was assigned to him. Without a proper technical library, he would prepare for himself the various tables needed by a construction manager, copy out material from texts brought to him by free workers, and immerse himself in his work. He abstained from the usual worthless talk about food and drink, sexual adventures that did or did not take place, heroic stories from the war, mostly imaginary—conversations that were the main pastime in the evenings and on the few holidays that prisoners had.

Through the intensive work, which drew on all his intellectual powers, Mulka evidently sought relief for his loneliness in this human wilderness, and perhaps also sought to mislead the operational department, which kept a close watch on

the prisoner with the diagonal red stripe across his file. “Look, the man has really repented. He’s completely dedicated to his work”

But no; Baley was not Brest. To get away from this god-forsaken place, he would have to invest a tremendous amount of thought and patience. And courage.

A prisoner who did not return exhausted and broken from his workday in the *osob* could find some of the best intellects with whom to talk. In the camps where I stayed, I met some of the most interesting people I’ve ever met—humanists, scientists, diplomats, actors, outstanding students, government clerks with a conscience, clergy, authors, artists, musicians, professionals of all kinds, lovers of literature Oddly enough, in a place where thousands of men are gathered, all defined as “enemies of the regime,” there was an excellent chance of finding the best of the intelligentsia from all over that large country. That is not to say that there were not also plenty of representatives of the ignorant and uneducated.

The national problems that troubled the Soviet Union in those days were clearly reflected in the *osoblag* camps, whose multi-national population could be classified into the following groups:

Russians: Among them were many from the military—former officers and soldiers—who had fallen into German captivity and changed sides, willingly or under duress; members of the Communist Party (including many Jews) who had transgressed and been accused—sometimes arbitrarily—of “ideological,” “organizational,” “practical” “or emotional” loyalty—or a combination of all of them—to Trotsky, Zinovyev, Bukharin or the like, who were imprisoned and “serving” in camps for, in some cases, the second or third time; people loyal to the “Leningrad practices” of the renowned economist Voznesensky (who was executed in 1950); and people who had ridiculed the regime or its leaders.

Ukrainians: Mainly from the territory annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939, who had risen against the (Russian) regime of occupation, among them many who had cooperated with the Nazis or fought against both the Soviets and the Nazis.

Baltic peoples: Mainly Lithuanians, but also Latvians and a minority of Estonians, who had or had not cooperated with the Nazis or but had fought against foreign rule.

Caucasians: Georgians, Armenians, members of Muslim peoples, and of course the Crimean Tatars who had been uprooted from their lands, including collaborators with the Nazis and those who had fought against their expulsion and exile. The Georgians, and especially the Armenians, had their own scores to settle with the regime.

Germans: Mainly from the Volga region.

Jews: Our brothers from the children of Israel, from every part of the spec-

trum—Zionists, devout Orthodox, those who deviated from the Party line in some way (see under: Russians), people who had ridiculed Stalin or the regime in general, Bundists, Chabadniks, community religious functionaries like *gab-bais* and so on, “cosmopolitans” and “followers of alien culture” of some kind, “poisoners of Soviet leaders, disguised as doctors,” engineers who “sabotaged the state economy,” “slanderers of the Soviet Union,” survivors of the Nazi Holocaust who could not explain why they had not been eliminated after all ...

... and I ask forgiveness of anyone not named in this list, which is certainly partial.

For the usual known reasons, part and parcel of a policy of “divide and rule,” the operational department was interested in stirring up trouble and sowing hatred between the different ethnic groups in the camps and setting them against one another, creating historical “coalitions” against those that had developed more lately, arranging for plenty of provocateurs and sycophants. In this way they fostered conflict between Russians and Ukrainians, Russians and Muslims, Georgians and Ukrainians in league with Lithuanians, etc., etc., etc.

The Jews were an interesting and impressive group in the camps where I was. With a few exceptions, willing or unwilling, all of us Jews of the camps could be proud—on a human, a moral, an intellectual and a social level—of our fellow Jewish prisoners and brothers in this world. Likewise in the *osoblag*—which had a very high class of prisoner overall—the Jews stood out to good advantage. Mutual aid, concern for new arrivals in the camp, “covert giving” to the needy, refusal to collaborate with the operational department, good human relations—all these forced a public that was generally hostile toward or suspicious of Jews, even the sworn anti-Semites, to behave with a certain respect toward the Jewish prisoners.

Not that there were no Jews in the camp who did not especially measure up, and there were middle-of-the-road people and even scoundrels, but the atmosphere I’ve just described does portray fairly the Jewish prisoners as a group, and the special focus among the Jews radiated out to others and attracted the good people from other ethnic or national groups. Only irremediable haters of Jews could ignore the phenomenon.

Did this banish anti-Semitism from the camp? No, definitely not. Among the free workers, anti-Semitism increased as the end drew nearer for Stalin—scourge of the “cosmopolitans,” discoverer of “the murderers in white coats”; among the more sycophantic prisoners there was a trend resembling what went on among their masters; and in the general population, there was anti-Semitism in all the usual forms, whether from profound ignorance, general xenophobia, or prejudice rooted in church doctrine or especially in Nazi propaganda to the effect that the Jews have an international conspiracy and that Bolshevism is the fruit of this

conspiracy, in the spirit of “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” All those factors played a part in the tangled web of relationships between Jews and non-Jews in the camp.

Indeed, consider the famous Russian writer, whose compatriots came to know him as a champion of right against wrong, and whom the world came to know as the denouncer of the disgraces of his homeland as it sank, defiled by its Communist regime, to the lowest levels of sin; the chronicler of the oppressive system of camps in his country, whose narrative horrified the entire world—which, until then, had ignored it all; the one who revealed to anyone still unaware of, or unwilling to see, the phenomenon of the kingdom of the gulag: This writer, so clear-sighted, somehow failed to discern the uniqueness of the Jewish collective in the camps. I can’t interpret this strange phenomenon except as a purposeful repression grounded in prejudice, the source of which seems to have been Christianity, Judaism’s rival. To denounce those few ugly Jews who were usually ostracized by the other Jewish prisoners, while showing an exaggerated affection for those same Jews whom he, the author, evidently created out of his imagination—and who for whatever reason resemble Christian monks—to ignore the Jews in the camps as they really were—this is to see only what one wishes to see and to describe a distorted reality.

Only after reading this great man’s book, entirely devoted to the fathers of the Soviet nation, only then does one apprehend the deepest springs from which he drank loathing for the Jews.

In the evening, as I leave the dining hall, a young Russian whom I do not know comes over to me, says my name and asks if I am he. When I affirm it, he explains that the work coordinator instructed him to go tomorrow morning to work with the brigade with which I, too, am working—a small group of service workers.

I explained to him where we meet in the morning before going through the gate, I asked him not to be late, and I explained how to identify us in the morning crush. I told him the name of the brigade leader: Yisrael Tzemach.

We chatted a little and exchanged the usual information—where he was from, how many years he’d been given, and so on. He was an engineer, he said, and had several hobbies, and he seemed friendly, modest and soft-spoken. Before we parted he added apologetically: “I think that I ought to tell you that, during the war, I was in the area conquered by the Germans and I have some prejudice about Jews ... I read ‘The Protocols of the Elders of Zion’ and the book impressed me ...”

A strange confession: Your ordinary anti-Semite does not announce his attitude to the Jews apologetically. Usually they do that with a beating or with curses, they express their repulsion, they tell a vulgar and humiliating joke, often aimed at someone else, not necessarily you ... I shrugged and told him that, so long as

he wasn't late in reporting for work at the gate, it wouldn't bother me, and adding that I did not think it would bother our brigade leader, Yisrael Tzemach, either.

The man was "cured" of his Nazi-influenced attitude after some candid conversations between us—about anti-Semitism and other things. I think that when there is a shared foundation of values and culture for a candid discussion of that disease called anti-Semitism, one ought to try to conduct it, but probably there is little point when this foundation is missing. Our friendship endured until my name was called along with the addendum, "With your belongings!"

More traveling ...

I think I know why I was transferred from Inta. I assume that it was an incident with a local KGB representative that was my downfall. This arrogant young officer invited me for a little talk and suggested that I become an informer. The dispute that erupted between us may not have been flattering to him; instead of punishing me or reporting to his superiors that he had failed to recruit me, he evidently preferred to dispense with my presence. Sending me away was itself a punishment, because I already had a comfortable job there; the fatigue of traveling to a new prison and the process of getting organized in a new camp always involved a lot of suffering.

I was taken with a group of other prisoners and put on board an eastbound train that was terribly crowded and dirty and very cold. The journey took two weeks. Finally we stopped near the Kuznetsk Mountains in eastern Kemerovo, in the heart of Siberia. This was at the end of 1951, at the height of winter. Leaving the railroad car, we straightened our bent backs and breathed clean air. The awful vista of hundreds of prisoners, dirty and blackened with soot, wrapped in rags and barely able to stand, against the backdrop of the beautiful forest and mountains we could now see, served only to emphasize the ugliness wrought by the rulers of this world compared with the beauty created by the Almighty.

Accompanied by armed soldiers and guard dogs, the long line began moving toward the guard towers poking above the wall of planks. This was a new camp, erected at a little distance from a coal mine in the Kuzbass (Kuznetsk Basin) area. Its tenants—all new there—had the job of erecting a large structure for refining the coal.

The suffering of prisoners starting from scratch is many times greater than that of "established" prisoners. The cabins were still under construction. The heating, in the dead of winter, was not working properly. Supplies did not arrive regularly. The guards and their dogs were irritable. Complete chaos reigned as new shipments of prisoners arrived from camps and prisons around the country. I ran around looking for friends or acquaintances or at least someone who had heard something about them.

Along with the "green" prisoners, who experienced pressure from extortion-

ists and thugs from the margins of the *osoblag* “society” for the first time, there were also “returning” prisoners—victims of the 1930s terror who in their time had already completed one prison sentence, and there were some veterans even older, who in the thirties or forties were already serving their second prison term—and now they would have a third round.

Jews were a large percentage of the prisoners. Most were victims of the pogrom inflicted on longtime activists in the cultural arena—Jewish culture and general culture—“cosmopolitans,” members of various “opposition” groups; they would arrive during the day, mostly, hounded into exhaustion and assaulted by fears they had already known in the past. Only their Jewish sense of humor and the support of relatives and friends in the camp kept their spirits up.

The code name given to our new camp was *kamishlag*—“camp of reeds.”

And as for Inta, there at the end of the world, with no very beautiful vistas, one could only be homesick for Inta.

About a year and a quarter later, there was a public announcement which we heard of, there in the heart of Siberia, via newspapers and radio, about the “Jewish doctors’ plot” ostensibly to murder Stalin and his associates. We began counting down: How many days or weeks did we have left? How long would the regime require in order to set the machinery of extermination in motion? The machinery already operating there, in the land of the camps, could also serve this other purpose.

Again I had no contact with Mulka for a long time, although geographically I was closer to him. The security services’ oversight of the camps was greater; censorship was tightened and many letters were destroyed or archived. The ancient policy of “divide and rule” was intensified—the prisoners were separated from the free workers, and the prisoners from their families. Lines of communication between prisoners in the various camps were severed almost completely. Relations deteriorated between the groups of numerical importance in the camps—Russians, Ukrainians, those from the Baltic states, Islamic peoples—and there is no doubt that the incitement to mutual hatred came from the “special” department. Ridiculous charges of attempted mutiny were invoked to justify issuance of a death sentence, renewed “at the request of the workers” (or as those gifted with black humor liked to say: “at the request of the prisoners’ mothers”). When prisoners were suspected of collaborating with “the department”—and the suspicions in many cases may well have been planted among the prisoners by that same department—prisoners of some other national or ethnic group would murder the suspects. Prisoners under suspicion of collaboration with “the department” tried not to fall asleep at night so as to avoid being murdered. Dismembered corpses were removed from the doorsteps of the cabins nearly every morning. Various ethnic groups began organizing to protect their members ...

I don't know if this was a provocation of the "special department" or whether they found someone to incite an uprising from some naïve faith in its possible success, but one night a few dozen Ukrainians climbed the camp gates (perhaps seeking refuge from Russian murderers)—and from the tops of the towers, the guards opened fire and killed dozens of them. This incident served the "special department" very well, because it could then report a mutiny aborted and meantime had created an atmosphere of fear in the camp. The Jews, as a group, tried and succeeded in remaining on the sidelines and avoiding involvement in these eruptions, but the growing atmosphere of anti-Semitism in the country soon began having an effect on the attitude toward Jewish prisoners, shortening tempers and intensifying the tensions.

A small group of very devout Jews—nearly all Chabadniks—made valiant efforts to keep the laws of *kashrut* and to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath by not going to work on that day. As time went on, they were increasingly abused.

Painful and depressing was the spectacle of the rounding up of one of these Hassidim, with his full beard and side locks, who was then, due to some confusion over hygiene rules, forcefully shaved: hair, beard, and side locks. In fact, the regulations permitted religiously devout prisoners to have beards. A thug in uniform bent over the weeping Jew to do the job; onlookers laughed uproariously; underworld characters stood around and cheered him on in this mini-pogrom. The entire incident was reminiscent of the darkest periods in Soviet history, and portended ill for all of us. The shorn hair of this Jew on the ground was an even stronger sign, for me, of the readiness of the regime to implement a "final solution," than were the anti-Semitic articles in the newspapers and the incitement on the radio, the increasingly anti-Semitic slang used by other prisoners, officers, and guards, and the various kinds of mistreatment of Jews carried out by the prison population.

After the announcement of the arrest of the doctors—most of them Jews—for allegedly having attempted to poison Stalin and his associates, it seemed like the end: The operational officer ran around the camp looking for the "*Zhids*"—the officers openly used the pejorative "*Zhid*" and no longer bothered with euphemisms like "members of the Jewish nationality." Lists of prisoners were checked to glean the names of Jews who had not yet been transferred from easy jobs to hard ones. It was clear that the physical capacities of these prisoners would not be checked this time—only their nationality would be checked.

The goyim also knew that our days were numbered, thanks to a well-developed ability to "smell" this sort of trend. Their hearing was pretty good, too. They heard what the officers were saying and they understood which way the wind was blowing.

Members of a devout Christian cult came to see me and told me that they would

pray for us and promised that their prayers would reach heaven ... Ten years ago, they said, they had not yet learned their lesson; they did not know ... They had turned the Jews over to the Nazis ... This time it would not be like that; this time the Jews would be redeemed, by the suffering of everyone in the camp ...

There were various methods of getting rid of the hundred or so Jews in our camp, without crematoria, gas chambers and all the rest of that technical paraphernalia. They would assemble brigades based on Semitic racial purity; these would be put in charge of prisoners who had served the Nazis in ghettos or crematoria, and they would be told to be very strict about meeting the quotas for clearing trees—and until the quotas were met, the entire brigade would remain out there in the freezing woods—“without a campfire!” Then they would see how many of them were able to stand on their feet at the next morning’s roll call, and anyone claiming to be ill would be sent to solitary—“without any heating!” They could also be denied their packages from home, prevented from getting hot soup, stuffed into a cabin without proper heating, the heating unit where they dried their felt boots could be locked shut, so that the next morning they would have to go out to work wearing wet boots. And “given no choice,” the authorities could also send them to isolation for not fulfilling the quotas, or for leaving dirt in the cabin, and so on and so forth ...

How much longer would they need—without going to the trouble of importing *Zyklon B* or erecting crematoria—before ridding the world of these people?

The atmosphere in the camp became intolerable. The decent people felt sorry for us ... It would be their turn next ... Meanwhile they were talking about expelling the Jews from the large cities—to here, evidently, or to some other snowbound forest. There was plenty of remote wilderness. Mother Russia is large, and broad.

I know that I am serving my last few days in this comfortable job calculating quotas. The free worker who is the manager here and his assistants are trying to postpone my transfer to an earthworks brigade, but I doubt they can postpone it much longer; the authorities are determined to set up Jews-only brigades ... During the afternoon, I sat at the construction site office working on all my quota calculations and tried to juggle them in a way that would enable the prisoners working toward quotas to satisfy them, and enable the work supervisor to sign off on the totals, without provoking suspicion among the hardliners in the construction administration.

The prisoners sat around the campfire and chewed on the bit of bread they had brought with them. Next to me, in the office, sat the young work supervisor—not only “free,” but he had finished his studies at a local technical school. He wanted me to teach him the secrets of cooking the books on quotas. He had just come back from his luncheon in the free workers’ quarter.

“How are things, Kolya, what’s new in the world of free citizens? Did they do their daily quota in six hours and stay to work extra hours for free?”

He was already used to my style and replied with his dry laugh that there was nothing new to report.

“But still,” I argued, “is it possible that today of all days the heroes of the mine industry will disappoint us?”

Kolya preferred to detail what he had eaten at the restaurant and to tell me that on his way back, he had seen people crowding around the “dish”—the public amplifier for radio broadcasts.

“Why today? Why were they crowding around? Were they listening to the soccer results or anxious to know how the coal mines in Kuzbass had performed the mission assigned to them by the party and Comrade Stalin, ahead of schedule?”

“No,” laughed Kolya, “today they did not talk about soccer or about standards. Today was sad ... they said something about Stalin. He is ill, apparently ... ”

My heart jumped.

“What did you say? Say it again! Stalin, you said?”

“Yes, Stalin is ill. They said he is ill ... ”

“Someone told you, or you heard it from ‘the dish’ with your own ears?”

“Yes, yes, I heard it myself ... Doctors have checked. They said he is sick ... ”

This innocent did not understand, he had missed it ... What a baby! Out of the mouths of babes ... “They” can go ahead and slaughter us ... Yes, massacre us, slaughter us all ... Woe to my people ...

I jumped up. I could not help myself. Kolya looked at me innocently: “What’s the matter with you?”

He did not understand, this innocent lamb ...

I am running in the snow. I must try to check what is happening with someone among the free workers, someone less naïve than Kolya. Coming towards me is my friend David Tzabadzeh the architect, also a prisoner. From Georgia.

David looked at me, his eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets, he gripped his head with his hands, stood up very straight, tore his coat off over his head and threw it down on the snow and began dancing—maybe it was their *Lezginka*? He was singing a song I did not catch, his eyes were raised heavenward, he was in ecstasy ... When he began dancing faster, I saw that the armed soldier in the guard tower was not taking his eyes off David ... I grabbed his arms and pushed him into the doorway of a building not yet finished, whereupon he fell on my neck and began babbling at a dizzying rate:

“We are going home ... That tyrant, finally ... That murderer ... We’re going home and you will be my guest in Tbilisi, you’ll see what a nice country we have, Georgia ... That murderer! And you’ll finally get to Palestine ... Only over a peo-

ple like this, the Russians, could that tyrant have ruled over, without limits ... The rivers of blood that were spilled, that murderer ... ”

I know that David’s noble family, among the old Georgian aristocracy, had begun their journey into fear as far back as the twenties. I tried to calm him.

I thought I ought to check on this with the free workers coming back from their midday break. They were more constrained than usual and seemed embarrassed. “Yes ... there was a notice like that ... ”

But the fear—what if the tyrant survived? He might get up, heaven forbid, from his sickbed.

No, impossible. If the radio had announced that he’d had a stroke, that meant he was already dead. But possibly only dying? He couldn’t get over it and go on ... And if he did get well? No, no, no ... he would slaughter us all ...

If he was still alive—blessed would be the hands that put an end to his life, the tyrant, even if it were the hands of Lavrenti Beria ...

Purim, today is Purim ... Who if not Reb Nathan—a sickly Jew, who was a rabbi or ritual butcher in his small village of Nyevel—who if not he, came up and hugged me: “Purim, imagine, on Purim the Holy One, blessed be He, performed the great miracle and Haman’s intrigue was broken ... Oy, Yasha my dear, we will yet see next Pesach and celebrate the exodus from Egypt ...”

I did so—although years later; Reb Nathan did not. His gaunt, tormented body could not hold out until the redemption ...

Possibly Mulka was not as acutely aware of the danger threatening us in the days immediately following the Doctors’ Plot: The criminal prisoners, among whom he lived, felt that the matter “did not concern them,” that it was another intrigue of Stalin to get rid of the “fascists,” the *contriks* (counter-revolutionaries—a term from the days of the revolution), the “enemies of the people” who had survived from the thirties, and all those sentenced under Article 58 of the Criminal Code. Nothing new under the sun ...

The criminal prisoners felt no fear or frustration, as the political prisoners did; their slogan was “God bless one day at a time”—imprisonment and the camp life were their natural state. This was their hour; now perhaps they would be needed, given the permanent axiom: When the authorities are after the political prisoners, they assist the criminals, the social stratum closest to the regime ... Now there would be chaos: They would interrogate, they would classify, there would be informers—an intriguing, a fascinating performance, and very bloody ...

First of all, they would set upon the Jews, perhaps exterminate them, and then deal with their supporters, their allies, their “queue of followers” (the authorities excelled at coining humiliating pejoratives to justify the abuse of their victims);

and the Armenians might also have their turn, since they had relatives abroad and were therefore dangerous; and then the Catholics, etc ...

The interval between the announcement of the Doctors' Plot and the death of Stalin was very short, and it is doubtful that the wardens in remote Baley had had time to gauge the political situation, while we in our *osoblag* were immediately caught up in an analysis of the internal ramifications that would influence developments within the gang ruling the Kremlin. It was interesting to participate, and not solely as a listener, in the fascinating debate among the old-timers in the camp. One had to hear how, with what resoluteness, the analysis proceeded to dissect the official announcements—its texts and subtexts—and our prisoners from the thirties were particularly interested in who might be better off and who disadvantaged in the struggle for superiority in the new regime, commencing immediately after the tyrant breathed his last, if not before.

No, such symposia were not possible in the Baley camp among all those criminals. There, the discussion was more materialistic: Will the food now improve, will the long workday be shortened ... It is highly doubtful that Mulka experienced the same rejoicing that filled my chest when, on the eve of Passover, they announced on the radio the release of the doctors, whom the Soviet media had only a few days earlier been calling "murderers in white coats." The Jews in our camp were like the bridegroom at a wedding; prisoners with whom I barely had exchanged two words came up to me, shook my hand, even hugged me. "Thanks to you, this is thanks to you; anyone who plots against the Jews—his fate is sealed: Hitler, Stalin ..."

And we, the Jewish prisoners, stood in the corners outside the dining hall as on a receiving line, accepting people's good wishes ...

I was sure that the uneducated populace of Baley did not realize that the real bridegroom was Samuel Lazarovich Yaffe, the Jew sitting amongst them ...

Nor, I fear, did Mulka.

Apparently Mulka did not understand the situation, due to an incorrect reading of what was happening, and what was about to happen, in the country. Not that there was a precise answer to the question of what was taking place; I'm afraid that in Moscow, too, the higher echelons did not know how things would turn out and how the battle for control of the regime would end. But given that the general slaughter looming over us had not happened immediately, we of the *osoblag* sensed that the Stalinists would be too late. Too many people at or near the top knew that if they did not restrain the heirs and prevent a trigger-happy response—they would be endangering their own necks.

In a country so well-versed in suffering—which since the rise of Stalin had seen the heroes of the revolution slandered and put to death—everyone, and the elites in particular, yearned for moderation and calm, and an end to the executions.

It was not easy to guess that the outcome would be as it was, but the abating of tensions after Stalin and Beria was inevitable.

The question of dismantling the camps was also in the air.

Yet Mulka was also right. The anticipated changes did not come about, apparently for either of us, in any event not right away, and hence he sought other avenues of rescue.

Our camp was moved. No one was sorry. The times were full of menace, and it was better not to think about what might have happened there if ... Change the place, change your luck?

We finished our job. The infrastructure and the building for the coal refining plant were finished—getting the equipment into place and launching the operation were left to the free workers.

... Once again we were pushed into stinking railroad cars, and taken for a journey, this time westbound, painfully hungry and thirsty, crowded and foul-smelling as usual, but it was a shorter trip this time. We were unloaded in western Siberia outside Omsk, at a site where we were supposed to erect an oil refinery. The local camp was emptied following a general amnesty given to criminal prisoners, for some reason, after the death of Stalin. So building the refinery now fell to us, the political prisoners.

En route, at one of the stations, we saw through the barred windows a trainload of prisoners being transported in the other direction, eastbound. There were women prisoners among them—“our sisters”—and there is nothing as depressing as the sight of women dressed in men’s clothing, dirty and tattered ... From the cries and shouts exchanged between the two prisoner transports we understood that Lavrenti Beria had been shot and killed.

The chief hangman had been executed with a gun. Maybe that boded well for us too, the politicals ...

A few prisoners were notified of their release.

Lyuba Voznesensky, son of the former Minister of Education for the Russian Republic, is going home. His renowned Uncle Voznesensky was a member of the Politburo, which controlled the national economy during the war. After the war, the whole family was badly hurt—Lyuba’s uncle and his father were put to death by torture—Beria personally supervised their slow and terrible deaths. The rest of the family, including the servants, were killed or sent to some desolate place, or thrown into the camps. Lyuba was one of the first to leave our camp for Moscow as a free citizen.

One prisoner was called to the camp administration and told that they had reviewed his file and found that there was no reason for his imprisonment; the sentence he was given was annulled ... Another heard that a friend of his, sen-

tenced as part of the same case, had had his sentence revised and was released ... Some other fellow was told that the date of his release had been moved up by several years ... And someone else was given a pardon.

More and more people were writing to complain about falsifications by investigators, abuse during interrogation, falsification of their evidence, witnesses frightened off and documents missing, gross errors and so forth, but mainly about violence, violence, violence. Prisoners were not satisfied with submitting a single complaint, nor had they patience to wait for a reply; they wrote to the chairman of the Supreme Soviet, to the Prosecutor-General, to members of the Politburo, to the major newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, to the Minister of Justice, to Secretaries of the Party—in Moscow, and in the various districts ...

... I acknowledged guilt because I could not stand the torture ... My wife falsely accused me because she was afraid that otherwise it might be detrimental to our children ... My friend accused me falsely because they threatened him ... The local party secretary coveted my apartment / my wife, so he framed me for speaking ill of Stalin ... Please check and you will be convinced that the political crimes I was found guilty of were carried out at the age of twelve, when I was a village child, and illiterate ... I was not an American spy, nor a Japanese spy—I am a member of a kolkhoz. I did not know any state secrets ... Lies ... Everything they wrote in the transcripts—lies ...

Millions of prisoners wrote, wrote, wrote ... Some set in motion twenty complaints in the hope that someone would check; they wrote from despair, from boredom, from a sense of “cast your bread upon the waters,” from “everyone else is writing—so I will, too ...”

Formulating and explaining a complaint, and writing it, became one of my jobs.

I, too, sent complaints—to the Central Committee of the Party in Moscow—which criticized the existence of the institution of secret trials—to the State Prosecutor-General and to the High Court. In my complaints, I protested against having been charged under the article dealing with “anti-Soviet propaganda”—which was never even mentioned during my interrogation. I demanded a new trial, lawful this time.

I received no reply, of course.

The complaints snowballed. Those who received no response to their complaint, or were not satisfied with the response—sent further letters of complaint to the superiors of those who had replied in the negative or had not replied—and to investigators and to auditors, to the Chief of State, to the Central Committee, etc., etc., etc ... A million such letters were stuck in the pipeline somewhere.

Even if they had sincerely wanted to, the authorities could not have coped with this deluge.

Though the number of released prisoners grew—here and there, they released members of the Party accused of “deviance,” defendants in famous conspiracy trials, defendants in absurd spy cases that defied logic—there was no real change in the number of political prisoners in the camps ...

The number of complaints, on the other hand, kept on growing.

The regime was under pressure to take some action, but continued to deliberate.

When the political prisoners were brought to Omsk, dropping from hunger and thirst and adorned with four patches with identifying numbers—on the chest, on the back, on the hat, and on the knee—the free people there who, in their time, had talked only with criminal prisoners, thought that the propagandists from the Party and the Camps Administration were right, and that these were animals: Look at them, criminals who under the Nazis had thrown infants into the furnaces and the gas chambers and sold the motherland to the enemy, for financial gain ...

Very gradually, the attitudes improved, especially when we began working jointly with the free professionals. In Omsk, the climate is continental. In winter, the mercury dropped to minus 30-40 degrees [-40F], in summer it jumped up past zero and stopped somewhere around 40 [104F]. The surrounding steppe was flat and level, and when the wind blew, it whipped sharp pellets of frozen snow into your face; in summer, the dust of the steppes found its way into your nose and throat.

We were set to digging trenches, erecting industrial buildings and setting up the equipment inside them. We built oil refinery buildings. Thousands of people, under armed guard on all sides, went out to the construction sites distributed over some thirty square kilometers. Every facility was fenced, to permit supervision from the guard towers and prevent escapes.

The camp authorities were embarrassed and did not know how to treat us. After Beria was executed by his comrades, things were a little easier for us, but later on, when there was unrest in a few of the camps, and even mutiny—the yoke became heavier again. Mass oppression cannot be liberal—certainly not over the long term. On the other hand, the current regime had become intolerable and as time went on, the authorities in Moscow realized that they would have to do something about the inheritance left to them by Stalin in the form of millions of prisoners who were poisoning the body of the nation.

They took the number badges off us. Had I been superstitious, I would have said that my number, comprised of the Russian letter “Z” and the number 963, the sum of which is 18 [*Chai, Life*] in *gematria*, did not disappoint.

I survived.

In 1954, after one of the pardons issued to criminal prisoners, a guest arrived in Riga from Baley—a prisoner who had been released and came to bring Ruth greetings from her brother. The guest told her what she already knew—that Mulka was alive in the camp in extreme isolation and had immersed himself completely in his work. He had distanced himself from his fellow prisoners and had befriended none of them—evidently in the rabble at the camp he had been drawn to no one. In a corner of the cabin allotted to four prisoners, in a passage about half a meter wide, separating the two lower bunks, Mulka generally sat in the evenings on his bed, his notebook on the little nightstand in front of him, and gave himself over to his own thoughts. Sometimes he read a book.

The man who brought these greetings emphasized that he had never seen Prisoner Yaffe smile; he himself had worked for a time in the camp infirmary and occasionally had given Mulka medicines to relieve stomach pains. The food in the camp is what caused these pains, but Mulka did not pay much attention to that.

The guest also said that in Baley, Mulka had worked on building a cinema for the free workers there. After that, he had worked on another few public buildings, and had planned and built a few others at the gold mine where the prisoners worked. By the standards of the place, his physical condition was reasonable.

Ruth continued to send him packages and sometimes also money. In the regular camps, there were no restrictions concerning these packages as there were in the *osob* network.

In the construction office at the camp, they treated Mulka with respect, but he did not socialize. He saw that thousands of criminal prisoners—and some politicals along with them—had been released. As time went on, he became increasingly convinced that the hope the political prisoners had pinned on a general amnesty was baseless. Once again it was the criminal prisoners who benefited—this time from the death of Stalin.

For a short time he was transferred to the vicinity of Kansk in the Krasnoyarsk district, where he was put to backbreaking work of uprooting trees, but after a while he was returned to Baley.

In his letters there was a hint that a free woman working with him was very devoted to him. Ruth hurried to send her a few presents.

Mulka began to lose hope that the few grudging random releases might benefit him personally. He was convinced that neither he nor I would be pardoned, nor would we get any considerable reduction in our sentences. Twenty-five! We had both been sentenced to spend twenty-five years in a camp until the end of our imprisonment in September 1971.

The new gang ruling in the Kremlin also had hands drenched in blood. Its people were anti-Semites. We must not hope for relief from them. Every prisoner

had cause for despair in the fact that months had already passed since the death of Stalin, and only a few prisoners had been released. If the regime paid no attention even to army people, officers and soldiers who had fought against the Nazis, been taken prisoner and disappeared into this hell that was the gulag because of Stalin's policy of blind faith in Hitler—if these had not been pardoned, or even had their sentences reduced, what were we complaining about?

The “quality” political prisoners had already been taken away from Baley by 1948/49 and transferred to the *osob*; Mulka was not among them, for whatever reason. In my eight years in the *osob* I met many prisoners whose political awareness was nil compared to Mulka's, whose education and cultural horizons were less than nothing next to his. Nor was there any essential or political difference between my “crimes” and his. It was beyond my comprehension why they had put me in the *osob* and left him in the regular system, causing his isolation and loneliness—fatal factors where he was concerned—but clearly the “institutions” that decided the matter could not have foreseen this. There is no logical explanation for the strange decision to leave him in the general system, and I tend to think that it was an error on the part of some foolish clerk, a cog in the machine of punishment, who did not understand what or who he was dealing with.

In Baley, the criminal elements remained behind, and Mulka was not inclined to adapt himself to them or their company, although his character was such that he could have played the part. But he did not want to, and forced himself instead into solitude and loneliness.

Activism, the search for a way out, action—as audacious as possible—these were integral to his personality; the non-action imposed upon him was disastrous for him.

He had no chance of a successful escape. He'd been cured of this fantasy as all newcomers were. When he recovered from his disappointment at seeing no basic change in the Soviet Union following Stalin's death, he chose another path. He risked his life to the most extreme degree in exchange for a chance to win his freedom and try to reach *Eretz Yisrael*.

The tunnel he entered probably had no exit. The weapons he had were defective.

He walked out onto a narrow bridge with no handrails that led him to the edge of the abyss ...

His plan was to torture himself with hunger to the point of exhaustion, irritate his injured stomach and force the camp authorities to take responsibility and release him to the care of his family, so that they could try to heal his suffering in a home environment, since his recuperation under camp conditions was no longer possible.

There were three hurdles to overcome in his plan—and only then would he

be released and sent to his sister Ruth. In general, the authorities were inclined to be responsive to a prisoner whose health had deteriorated enough to put his life at risk, mainly because the authorities were not interested in confessing that prisoners under their supervision were dying of exhaustion. This may have been one of the signs of liberalization after the Stalin era.

First of all, Mulka had to persuade the doctors that he was indeed very ill, and for that purpose he had to revive his stomach ailment and prove that he was incapable of digesting the substandard food provided to him by the camp kitchen, that he was losing weight and becoming weaker, that he was on the point of death.

If he could persuade the doctors, he would pass this hurdle successfully, but the second and decisive hurdle was to persuade the operational officer, who had to grant his approval for any transfer of a sick prisoner from the camp to his family. There was a reasonable chance that, if Mulka were able to get through the second phase, the district court—the third hurdle—might rule in the affirmative in his case.

His prospects for passing all these hurdles successfully, however, were negligible, almost nil, because everything was against him: The doctor who might discover that his stomach pain was self-inflicted; the operational officer who would do everything in his power to insure that a Jewish political prisoner, a member of the intelligentsia sentenced to twenty-five years' imprisonment, who had once tried to escape, who was a traitor to the motherland, remained in the camp for the rest of his life; the judges who would be guided by the operational department ...

It seems that Ruth was too late. Mulka was possessed by the dybbuk of once-and-for-all; her insistent pleas that he stop torturing his weakened, deteriorating body fell on deaf ears. He argued bitterly that she did not understand his struggle ...

Her hands tied, she watched him going under and was unable to save him.

Did he believe that he would succeed?

Perhaps he was hooked on the struggle for a lost cause, by the long odds, a hundred to one, that his intrigue would be exposed ... but he did not want to, indeed was unable to, admit his failure and change course.

Or perhaps the odds did not seem that bad, to him?

To count off each day that passed, every hour, every minute and each second; to feel in your bones that the gate is closing, with the guard towers above it, the machine guns aimed at your head; meanwhile continuing to live among the rabble wallowing in its filth, the endless obscene language, the ugliness and degeneration all around ...

Twenty-five!

... The crisis recycles time after time, the enervating despair at the sight

of prisoners all around whose lives are wasting away behind the barbed-wire fence ...

This is familiar.

How is death different at Baley or Inta from the death at Ponary—a death of the helpless, “like sheep to the slaughter”?

Freedom is not given as a present ...

Was he driven by remorse over having come back from Italy in the autumn of 1945? That he had not heeded the counsel of friends, and returned after about a year from Poland to the Soviet Union? That twice he had dared, with eyes wide open, enter the “lair of the beast”? Would his duty not have been fulfilled by taking on any of the tasks that the *bricha* headquarters wanted to give him in the struggle for the state in the making—aiding *ha'apala* [illegal immigration to Palestine], working in purchasing, in punishing Nazi criminals in hiding—whatever he chose?

That cursed Friday in Baranovich ... only one step between him and his home, his kibbutz, waiting for him ...

To rot in Baley? To struggle through another dismal day of wasting away?

Was he thinking clearly when he rejected any other way out? When he did not give in to Ruth's pleas? When he did not believe that she would, and could, struggle on his behalf? When he appointed himself to manage the battle?

Here is what Ruth says:

At the beginning of 1955, Mulya wrote to me in code that the director of the medical department promised that if he gave him five thousand rubles and obtained clothes and other things for him, he would issue him an aktirovka. He wrote that he was preparing for this, in other words, preparing to be ill. He had a stomach ailment and the X-ray showed it, but he also had to prove that the physical condition of the patient was bad. I immediately understood that he was planning to stop eating in order to achieve a weakened physical state.

I replied in code that I would send him everything he requested. I only asked that he watch out for his health. If what he was doing would endanger his life, in God's name would he please not do it. He did not reply.

I sold the diamond ring I inherited from my mother and began sending him sums of money. I would put the money into tubes of toothpaste. He wrote me that they were transferring him suddenly to some other place. He did not know where they were taking him. And again the contact stopped, for about two months. After that, I received a letter from Baley, from the same camp. He wrote that his health now was much worse, that he was seriously ill and could not

work. I was very alarmed. I knew that this could have severe consequences. I decided to write him more often so that he would not lose his composure, and Mulka began preparing the ground for me to come to him. He wrote me that there are many cases now, after the death of Stalin, where they release prisoners. Many relatives come and take their sick relatives from the camps and bring them home. I understood the hint and wrote to him that, if his health was that bad, I would come to him. I went to Leningrad, to my uncle, and he gave me five thousand rubles. I had about another three thousand. The ticket and expenses cost a lot of money. I had to make arrangements in order to leave the children behind. I wanted to get a plane ticket for a direct flight to Irkutsk-Tchita. I waited three weeks to get this ticket. The flight operated only once a week.

He also wrote that they wanted to operate on his stomach, but were afraid he could not survive it.

I left on March 6, 1955. I took as much money as I could, and clothing for one woman, as he had asked. He notified me that I should wait for her, Nadya Zhdanova, at the station, and that I should not leave there without her. She would tell me about the situation.

I flew to Tchita in 36 hours. From there, I had to travel to Priyasnaya by train. When I arrived, at three o'clock in the morning, I was very tired. Two men immediately came up to me and offered to drive me in their Jeep to Baley. They came straight up to me. Not to anyone else. This is an area of forced labor camps and a lot of released criminals hang around there. A lot of people came on the train and they all stayed in the station, waiting. People lay down on their suitcases or on the floor and waited for morning. I told the young men that I would not go with them, that I would wait until the morning. They said that I would be sorry later, and left. In the morning, Nadya came in a Jeep and took me. I saw before me a very pleasant woman, 26 years old, Mongolian, dark, friendly. She treated me like a sister. She began immediately to tell me about Mulya, that she likes him, that he has helped her a lot, that they worked together in some bureau; that I should just not be alarmed when I see him—his situation is very grim, he looks very bad ... She brought me straight home—to a very nice wooden house, clean, with a lot of flowers in the yard. I got the impression that they like flowers very much. She lived with an aged mother and they received me very well. I did not know where the camp was. It was about six kilometers from their house. I bathed immediately, ate something, put together a package for Mulya and asked Nadya to show me where the camp was. She

was a little afraid to go there, but still she accompanied me almost to the camp itself. The route went between mountains and it was easy to get lost there, because the snow covered everything and it was hard to see anything.

I came to the camp administration and they brought me immediately to the operations officer. I felt an instant antipathy to him. He took me into his office and began the conversation by asking to whom I had brought a bribe. I had already learned how to talk to these people so I told him right away: "If you ask, that means that you are expecting a bribe. I will not give you anything, because I work in a factory and I have nothing." I could feel the tension. They did not let me meet with Mulya that same day. I waited a long time, until three-thirty or four, and it was already dark. I went back to Nadya's house very depressed. I cried. I understood that he was really in a bad way.

In the evening, one of the prisoners who had permission to leave the camp without a guard came to Nadya's house and brought me a very detailed letter from Mulya. Mulya was sorry that I had not received permission to meet with him. I should come the next morning. He wrote that he wanted me to get the aktirovka for him and take him home, but he had already damaged his relations with "them."

His biggest enemy was the operations officer—the one who had spoken with me. Twice the doctors had prepared a summary saying that it was impossible for him to recuperate under camp conditions. Afterwards there should have been a trial to decide that he should leave the camp and be turned over to the custody of his family, but the camp administration simply did not submit the paperwork to the court. Mulya wanted me to try to arrange that they should do so. I went to the civilian doctor who had treated Mulya and wanted to operate on him. I talked with him about Mulya's condition and his prognosis. He and his wife received me well. The doctor said that if Mulya agreed to surgery, afterwards he could give him his agreement to release him. True, even without an operation there is proof that he cannot get well, but still they would not submit the file to a court so long as they had not done an operation. I saw that this doctor could not help me, that they would not take his opinion into consideration. I decided that, after the meeting with Mulya, I would go back to Tchita and try to find the chief doctor for the camps. The next day I went again in the early morning to the camp to get a permit for the meeting, and again they made me wait three hours until they let me into the visitors' room. I don't know why—they locked me in the

room. I sat there about an hour and a half, getting more nervous and alarmed: What would they do to me? They are not arranging the meeting, no one came in, they've locked me in here. I went to the door and began to knock on it. I knocked harder; no one came ... I took a chair and began banging it on the door until someone guard came. I was upset and I said to him: "I am not a prisoner, why am I locked in? Why are they not arranging this meeting for me? What are you doing with me?" He calmed me down and left the door open, and again I waited. I got very annoyed because it was already late and I saw that half the day was already gone. Perhaps once again they would not arrange the meeting? I felt that something was not right. Finally, they brought Mulya.

I was shocked, terribly shocked. He was simply unrecognizable. He was a skeleton with eyes, dressed in clothes. He looked awful. I saw that he was very emotional, that something had happened, something terrible. The guard was not going to leave us alone and Mulya began to tell me very quickly, in Yiddish, that he had prepared some notes for me—a few instructions—and that they had found the notes. He said that they never undress the prisoners going to a meeting, but they had undressed him completely and had looked and had found the notes, and he had put them into his mouth and tried to swallow them, but they managed to get the notes out of his mouth. There was a struggle and he was beaten badly. He was barely alive and as he told me this, the operational officer arrived and said that he could not permit the meeting to continue because what Mulya had done was a crime. I began to plead, I said that Mulya had committed no violations, that he had always behaved well. He said that that was correct, but in this case he had behaved very badly and that without instructions from the commandant at Tchita, he could not let me continue. I asked that they at least take the food I had brought him, because I had to go. I returned to the house in the dark, tired and worn out. I realized that I could not do anything for him, that Mulya himself had spoiled things. All those notes were superfluous. For two more days I went to the camp and did not receive a permit to see him. I was brought before the camp superintendant and explained to him that evidently my brother was very ill indeed and because of that, he had done something foolish—since he, too, clearly knew that he could tell me everything in person and did not need to write anything down. I explained that there was nothing political in the notes. I pleaded with him, I explained my situation, that I am a woman alone and that it was very difficult for

me to collect enough money to come there; that I had come to help my brother and that they should also take me into consideration and give me another chance to see him. I promised that I would not talk about anything prohibited, that I would speak only Russian. He agreed that we could meet again, the next day at one o'clock. Again the same abuse: They told me to come at eight. I waited until one. Then they told me that it was already midday, then they said they were giving him injections. Finally, at four, they brought him to me and allowed us to talk for only half an hour. Mulya was very depressed because he understood that he had spoiled things. He told me that in Tchita there was currently a meeting of the Party plenum, and that there was one person there in charge of supervision of the rights of prisoners. He told me his name and said that I should go to him. He also told me the name of a doctor—Bazhenov. I went to Tchita. Bazhenov was the district doctor who had already agreed twice to Mulya's release and had provided the paperwork for the aktirova. He was an educated man. He understood me very well. I told him that my husband had also been a doctor, and that he had been all through the war as a doctor. Bazhenov explained the situation to me: All the medical details were in Mulya's favor, and he had already submitted the paperwork twice without anyone having asked him to, and what happened? The political considerations ... The operational officer—he and his people—were against it. Here, for example, there was another prisoner in a similar condition to Mulya's and the charges against him were similar, and they had released him. They were releasing a lot of people. I had also seen people being released in the days that I was there.

I met with the superintendant of the camps administration, an officer with the rank of podpolkovnik—equivalent to our lieutenant colonel. He spoke with me very courteously but stuck to his point—Mulka was the biggest criminal they had in the Tchita district; he was a “recidivist,” he had run away from detention, he had gotten away and escaped from a prison. He knew everything about Mulya, even what had happened in Valdai, at the beginning of the war. I went to the commanding prosecutor. He was a very uncivil Tatar, who shouted at me and received me in a terrible manner. He simply wanted to frighten me, so that I would run away from there: “Why did you come? What do you want? You Jews find all the cracks!” I began to explain to him that he did not know the case, that he had not seen Mulya's file. Mulya had been in prison a long time already and behaved well and deserved an earlier release date; he had a right

to be pardoned; perhaps his crime these days was not considered so great. He did not want to listen.

I went to the Party secretary, who was in charge of the welfare of the prisoners. It turned out that he had been in Baley and had seen Mulya there. I told him everything, I told him that I saw that they are not taking his case to court even though the committee had given its approval. The man lied to me, and when I came again they told me that he was on vacation. I went to the local first secretary of the Party and told him the whole story. “No, that’s the biggest criminal,” he said, adding: “After all, your brother was a soldier in Ulmanis’ army in Latvia.” I explained to him that every citizen had been obliged to join the army, just as with any other regime, but he could not understand it ... When I realized that the paperwork was already in court, I went back to Baley, and then I heard that they were transferring Mulya to Nerchinsk! The court would be in Baley a few days hence—but they are transferring Mulya to Nerchinsk ... I begged them not to transfer him, to leave him another few days until the court arrived. No one wanted to listen. They would not even let me meet with him again. They dragged him to Nerchinsk so that the hearing could not be held. They told me that the local clinic is no longer operating and they cannot leave him without medical help at Baley—hence they must move him to Nerchinsk ... I spoke with the man who was his nurse. I did not see Mulya himself. I asked this nurse to please look after him on the way, because they were taking him in an open truck and the temperature in the morning there was forty degrees [-40F]. The camp was dismantled around that time. Many people went home and all the prisoners who had been there were moved elsewhere. I saw one group of prisoners—they loaded them onto an open truck and they left on a journey of 250 kilometers. They prisoners sat on benches, most of them fairly well dressed, but still! On such a morning, to take people 250 kilometers in an open vehicle! It was savagery! The nurse promised me that Mulya would be moved in a hygienic vehicle. Anyway they let me meet with him once more at Baley. I don’t remember exactly, but it seems to me that it was on Sunday, and I left for the camp early in the morning and there was a blizzard. I lost my way. I went on for about five hours and couldn’t go any further, because there was so much snow that I simply lost all sense of direction. I thought I was going to die, because I couldn’t go on any further. I felt that I was going round in circles and did not know how to get out of there, until finally I met some man who brought me to the camp. I was late and feared that

again they would refuse to arrange to let me see him. It was visiting day for many of the prisoners. They brought the prisoners and their relatives into a special room and seated them at a table—across from one another. I said that none of Mulya's relatives had been to see him for many years. "Let me meet with him today." I also was in a pitiable state—tired, frozen—and it all depended on the local superintendant, and he gave me the meeting. I waited another hour or so until they brought Mulya. He was very weak. He could not even sit. His face was awful—skin and bones. What was left of Mulya was his eyes. His teeth and the shape of his fingernails. Nothing else reminded me of my Mulya. It was very hard. Some people sitting next to me were talking very loudly, and I could not talk much with him, because he wasn't able to sit down for even an hour at a time. We talked about twenty minutes, and he left. I tried to persuade him to stop, but he was very irritable. He did not want to hear a single word. I told him that this was a different period: "You see that people with charges like yours are being set free. They've already dismantled that camp, which means that a lot of people have gone home. It's a question of time. At this point, something can be done, and I will do it. I will do everything. If I don't succeed here—I'll try in Moscow. I'll get a lawyer, I'll run around everywhere, but what will all that accomplish if you don't live? And if you go on this way—you will not stay alive." He did not want to hear. He berated me: "You don't understand anything. You don't understand my great sacrifice and my great effort, and now I must lose? This is the only way, and I know myself. I am strong, I will hang on." He did not want to hear me! I saw that if he continued this way, he had no chance.

Of course I went to Nerchinsk. That is where they sent the dekabrists (Decembrists) a century ago after their uprising against the Tsar failed ...

The papers had not yet arrived, but they let me meet with him. After the journey he was broken ... There was a doctor there, a woman, who knew him. She was on the committee that had already prepared his papers twice. I spoke with her, woman to woman. Aside from that, her husband was an amateur painter and I understand painting. I tried with both of them. I looked for some human connection, so that they would believe me, and respect me. Afterwards I began talking about my brother's situation. I told them that I could see that he was near death, that I really could save him only if he was released to me. I said that it seemed to me that there was a special attitude, a terrible attitude, toward him, and that this attitude is

not justified, that he is not a criminal, that he is a young man who made a big mistake, and has already paid for his crime, and that he has already been in conditions like these for nearly ten years now, that he is going to be lost. I felt sympathy on their part. I was able to leave the house with the woman. She was walking to the camp and told me that I should go along with her, and then there was some human conversation between us. I asked her: "Tell me, what is his condition?" And she answered me: "Well, you know what he is doing. Even if he stops—I am not sure I can save him." That's what she said. She saw my despair ... I told her that my time off was already over, and that I had to go back to work. I have stayed here for too long, I said, and my return will be unpleasant, but I cannot leave my brother in this condition. She told me that there was little chance of an aktirovka, and also that his prospects for staying alive were not good. She promised me that if he started eating again, she would do everything she could to save him, but he had to eat ... I tried to persuade him to stop his fasting, that the times are different now, and that now it is possible to act on his behalf. He did not want to believe that his condition was that bad, that dangerous. He did not want to believe me! I tried again at Tchita. I sat there for a week. I ran around meeting with all the doctors, and I argued: "What are you doing? You promise me that you will bring him to a hearing, and then instead you bring him to some other place!" I went to see the supervising prosecutor again, and everywhere I had to wait a long time, to sit in a queue, to hear stories about a lot of people, who were also waiting, and about their similar cases.

I stayed there until the last evening. The court was supposed to leave there for the camp. I traveled on the same train with the judge and the others. We arrived at Nerchinsk. At four o'clock in the afternoon, I was with the judge and asked whether he had the file and he told me, "Yes," he even showed it to me ... The next morning, I ran to the hearing, I met that Tatar and did not even go in to see him, but he came to me and said: "Your matter will not come up today." "What? What's the problem? Why not?" I went in to see the judge immediately, but there was a discussion going on in the room. I called the secretary and asked her what was going on, what was happening, why? And she told me: "At six in the evening, someone came from the Camps Administration and took the file ... "

They played with me, on and on, they promised, and behind my back they fixed it so the hearing would not take place. I should have left already. I was there for forty days, and my leave was only for two

weeks. I was afraid that I would lose my job. I also saw that I would not be able to fight these institutions. I have no power and no support. I was staying in the hotel there and the hotel manager was a friendly woman. I told her briefly about our situation. She advised me to go to Moscow and tell the institutions there about my case; "Here you won't accomplish anything." I ran to the doctor again, and asked her to do whatever she could to help Mulya get well. I promised that I would leave money, if she could just make sure that he got milk and eggs. I left money with the woman at the hotel and she promised. I gave her gifts, too. She promised that twice a week she would buy food and bring it to him. What else could I have done? I ran to the camp, I cried, I knew that this was the last time I would see him. I had my ticket and I had to go back. I also got letters from home that my son was ill. He had broken his arm. I knew that I could not stay there any longer. In Nerchinsk they treated me better, they gave me another meeting with Mulya. The doctor's husband helped me arrange that. The meeting was very hard. First, they did not give us a room; I stood next to the screen and on the other side stood Mulya. He was weak and could not stand up for long. The guards were there too. A few times I began speaking Yiddish and they told me to speak Russian. I slipped in a few words in Latvian. The only thing I wanted to get into his head—was that he should stop fasting. Stop. Start eating. That he stay alive. That now there are possibilities to do something on his behalf. That he should start eating, and get well, that there are more friends, there's Yaka, that he is also waiting patiently, that now there's hope. That I will come again, I will run to Moscow, anywhere, that I'll get everyone working for him. That he should just be alive.

And so we parted. I left him all the money I had. It was about three and a half thousand. He promised me that he would use it only to get well. He promised me, because I pressured him. I did not talk about anything else. He promised me that he would change direction. He also managed to tell me what had happened in Krasnoyarsk: there, too, they had submitted his papers for an *aktirovka*, and the doctor extorted from him everything I had sent him and Mulka even went into debt ... He gave it all to him and at the last moment, when the hearing should have been happening, the doctor went on holiday and disappeared. There was no hearing. Mulya declared a hunger strike and they hurried to force-feed him. Terrible things went on there, and in the end they sent him to Baley. They tied him up in the end because he refused to get into the carriage. He made a huge fuss—he could not bear it that the doctor had lied to him. The hear-

ing was to have been held in another day or two, but they lied to him three times and cancelled the hearing ...

At one of our meetings he did manage to give me some tiny notes, on which he had written his diagnosis. He also wrote which regulations and which laws fit his case and I used these when I was in Moscow dealing with his affairs.

I went back to Tchita and stayed there two more days. I barely managed to get a meeting with the director of the MVD [Interior Ministry] of the Tchita district, Polkovnik Romanov. I went to him officially, but they did not let me see him. They told me that he was not receiving anyone. I don't remember how I got his telephone number. In the telephone directory he was not listed. I called him at home. Someone helped me with this—I don't remember who. I told him that I had come from Latvia, that I had stayed here more than forty days already, that I had not accomplished anything here and that I very much requested him to grant me an opportunity of speaking with him. He told me to come the next day to his office. He received me very promptly. Before that I had managed to talk with his secretary, who had once been in Riga at the seashore. I invited her, of course, to come to visit me and promised that I would do everything for her. He ushered me in and told me very simply: "We know that your brother is faking. He is a simulant. We know that he is starving himself. I also have a stomach ailment, and I know." I said that my brother is not getting food he can eat, that he is getting black bread and some kind of cabbage soup that he cannot digest. And from that, he has pain. Then he said: "Sometimes I also have pain from a glass of water that I drink. Nevertheless I continue to eat." It was that kind of irony. This fat person sits there, elegantly dressed, well groomed, sits there and compares himself to a man who is going to die, who is really a skeleton. He tells me stories. I told him that twice they had lied to him about a hearing and he replied: "All of this is known to me. I do not want this man to leave the camp. He is a big criminal. He is still a young man and we will cure him yet. Now we will bring him to Khabarovsk, to the best hospital, and treat him there. He will get well and we will educate him to be a decent human being."

"And what if he dies now? Don't you have a rule that, if a prisoner cannot get well under your conditions, then he has to be released ..." I said.

He replied that a lot of people also die in freedom: "It's not a big tragedy. People also die in freedom."

I saw that there was no point in talking with him, that I had

reached the end of the argument with him, and I said: "Polkovnik Romanov, I am going to Moscow and I know your name. I will lodge a complaint about you. I will mention your name everywhere and I will write that you are guilty of my brother's death."

Then I left. I accomplished nothing there.

From there, I went on to Moscow. I stayed there about a week. I went to the supervising prosecutor, I went to the military tribunal, to the Party Central Committee. I went to the Supreme Soviet. Everywhere I went, I submitted a complaint. I wrote that my brother was in a dreadful state, that he could not be healed under those conditions. I also went to some lawyer and asked him to write these complaints for me. All I encountered was irony and empty promises. Of course they did nothing. I submitted paperwork wherever it was possible to submit it and wherever I was advised to submit it. Beyond that, I could do nothing—just go home.

About two months later, he was moved from Nerchinsk to Khabarovsk. He began to write to me, saying he was doing everything possible to get well. He was trying to eat well. He understood that he had to eat well, but he also wrote me that the doctors could not help him; that one of the doctors told him that he was like the seven lean cows who swallowed the fat ones and did not fatten; that they were giving him all the tests and all the treatment required and that he was getting good food, because Khabarovsk is a larger city and everything is available there, but his health was not improving.

Mulya was at Khabarovsk for a few months and then asked suddenly that I send him a photo album. I sent it. Then he asked for a few books and from the tone of the letters I thought that perhaps there was a change after all, that his condition had improved, because he stopped writing only about his health. He had all kinds of requests. Of course I did everything he asked and I thought that perhaps he really was getting better. Suddenly I got a letter from him saying that again they were moving him somewhere else, and he did not know where, "but I know that I will not make it there. This is my last road." Nonetheless he asked me to send him a little money. I sent it immediately, by telegraph. I received confirmation from him that he had received it. He wrote that he was amazed that the two hundred rubles arrived so quickly, that he thought that the money would enable him to buy something along the way, and that he would not be hungry and would write to me from the new place.

They moved him to Bira, in Birobidzhan.

I consulted with Ilka Zaiden and went immediately to Moscow. I

thought to go again to all the places I had already been to. This was October of 1955. I arrived in Moscow and went to my relatives and told them what Mulya's condition was. Again there were consultations, running to a lawyer; once again I wrote and signed all kinds of papers, and I wrote that his condition had worsened and that I was not seeing results, and why all this bureaucracy and foot-dragging, when someone's life is at stake ...

I went to my cousin to ask about some paints that I needed for my work; our relations with him had always been rather cool. He came over to me and I noticed the warmth of his attitude. He said that we would go to Aunt Bluma's. When we got there, I saw that all the family had gathered there. Bluma took out a letter that had arrived from Bira, from one of the prisoners, a Tatar, his name was Aliyev, who had written that Mulya died. He wrote that they had been together all the time in the hospital, that they had traveled seven or eight days in a closed railway car and had received no treatment or help. They got only dry food. The entire hospital had been moved from Khabarovsk to somewhere else. Everyone's condition was very poor, and when they opened the railway car, no one was able to stand up unaided. Everyone was in a terrible condition. The hospital at Bira had been full, so they had distributed them to various places. They separated him from Mulya and put them into different buildings. During the day, some prisoner came over to him and told him that Yaffe's condition was very, very bad, and that Yaffe was asking for him, Aliyev, all the time. Aliyev found out where he was and went to him, but he was already unconscious. Aliyev sat next to him until three in the morning. Until he died. Mulya could not tell him anything. Aliyev looked in Mulya's things, in case he had left something for me, but he found nothing ...

Even a prisoner's dead body was not spared by this regime, whose emblem was violence. The heavy axe in the hands of the sentry stationed at the camp gate, whose duty it was to chop off the skull of the deceased lying on the cart on his way to the pit, seemed to be saying to every prisoner still alive: Do not try to cheat your captors! I, the axe, warn any pretender that he will not pass this gate alive—he will be put to death!

... Into one of the pits dug in a special area alongside the camp, the prisoner gravediggers threw the body.

On March 12, 1957, Ruth was sent, at her request, an official death certificate confirming her brother's death....


РСФСР — ר פ ס ס ר

СВИДЕТЕЛЬСТВО О СМЕРТИ צ״ג עניש וועגן טויט

ЕЩ № 032192

Гр. Цоаре (фамилия, שׂטעטל)

Самуил Лазаревич (имя и отчество, נאמען און פאטער-נאמען)

умер (да) 14/10-1955г. Седьмнадцатого октября
מ'עלף און צוהענציקטן יום אלול ה'תשנ"ה (прописано)
 (число, месяц и год, יום, חודש און שנה)

Причина смерти Ухудшение сердечной деятельности
פערשערע (פירשערע)

о чем в книге записей актов гражданского состояния о смерти
 וועגן וואס אין בוך פון צענזур-קאסט פון בירגער-שטאנד קעגן טויט

1954 года марта месяца 12 числа
ה'תשנ"ד מרץ י"ב אדר

произведена соответствующая запись за № 56.

Место смерти: город, селение Биробиджан
בירובידזשאן (שטעטל און שטוב)

район ЗАО область, край Хабаровский
זאוו קראי (קראי, געגנט, ראיאן)

республика РСФСР

Место регистрации Бюро загс города Биробиджана
בירובידזשאן (наименование и № уезд)

Хабаровского края,
 (наименование бюро ЗАГС и № уезд)

Дата выдачи 12. марта 1957г.
ה'תשנ"ז (число, месяц и год)

Заведующий бюро записей актов гражданского состояния
Левковская (פירשערע, שטוב און בירגער-שטאנד קעגן טויט)

Российский ш. Голицына. 1942.

A printed form in Russian, with translation into Yiddish alongside or underneath—this is the official death certificate of Birobidzhan, on which the Russian entries state in the Cyrillic alphabet, that Samuel [Shmuel] Lazarovich [Ben Eliezer] Yaffe died on 14 October 1955 at the age of 37. Cause of death: “deterioration in heart function ...”

The certificate was issued in Birobidzhan, the Autonomous Jewish Area in the Khabarovsk district—hence the bilingual aspect—and signed by official Li-evkovskaya.

The square letters on the form—our letters—standing out like a spasm of horror, a reproach to the Jewish State, which was unable to bury its son in its own soil.

Epilogue

Since along with Mulka's history, I have told the reader more than I originally intended about myself, I ought to include the story of the end of my imprisonment.

Word of Mulka's death, in a letter from a relative of mine, did not reach me at the camp at Omsk until February 1956, on the last day of the 25th Congress of the ruling Party, convened in Moscow.

Dismay and pain: How could this have happened, how could his struggle have not stopped short of the grave ... I was sure that he had been in control of the entire process. It never occurred to me that he could have dropped the reins ... Only about a year later did I hear the whole story, from Ruth. Maybe there were important details missing from her account, but either way—they neither add nor subtract anything ...

The turning point that was about to occur in our lives, we guessed when the secret speech by Nikita Khrushchev to the Party convention began circulating by word of mouth. Although the pace of prisoner releases increased, an overall solution to the problem had not yet appeared.

In the spring, we heard that a committee had been created, chaired by the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, President Kliment Voroshilov: this committee and its subcommittees had been charged with examining the files of all the political prisoners, and these committees had been given the standing of a supreme judicial authority. Their decisions would be final.

Early in the summer of 1956, these committees began operating in the camps where the political prisoners were concentrated. Day after day, groups of these "esteemed" omnipotent personages convened in the camps and decided, based on mere words spoken by their members, the fates of multitudes.

A prisoner would be brought before the committee, and one of its members—generally the local prosecutor or some other judicial figure, who had studied the gist of the case—would explain to his peers what the person had been accused of and what punishment he had received; the members would ask questions of the accused, listen to his explanations and make decisions on the spot. The general trend was to leniency, as the committee heard a stream of cases, as many as 80 a day. As a result of this activity, dozens of prisoners a day were leaving the camps and going home completely "exonerated" or with restricted rights; others were sentenced to remain in the camp under reduced sentences or under the full sentence originally meted out to them (the latter generally being war criminals who had murdered or abused people, or bona fide spies, such as there were). The committee members were exceedingly suspicious of the sentences handed down

by secret courts (the OSO), especially after that institution was done away with as “contrary to socialist legislation.”

Members of the committee tended to be understanding when the accused had been either very old or very young when the crime was committed, or when the accused expressed remorse, or requested a pardon or promised not to run afoul of the law again.

From prisoners who provided technical services to members of the committee, I heard that when my turn came and the prosecutor found in my file only the sentence itself, he had shrugged and asked Moscow for the file on the investigation so he could understand of what I had been accused. From that same source I heard that, when the material arrived and the prosecutor looked it over, he blurted out: “Really, come now! They overdid it, they overdid it, the fellows at Lubyanka ... OSO would swallow anything, apparently ...”

When I was summoned by the prosecutor, he asked what I had to say about the allegations he had found in the material. I responded that I had not signed what I did not wish to sign; I could not deny the gist of the things written in the files—there was more than enough definitive proof against me. The prosecutor sent me back to the camp and a few days later summoned me before the committee.

Friends who already had experience with appearing before this body warned me: Do not be stubborn and do not get into an argument with members of the committee. It is important that you make a good impression on them, that you express remorse for your acts, that you promise to be an upright citizen, and that you denounce your past—that will greatly increase your chances to earn a pardon or a substantially reduced sentence. Don’t argue. Don’t be insolent. Be humble, and promise that from now on you will behave well and repent. Shed a tear ...

I told myself that I would try to be modest and not be drawn into provocative arguments

Five men sat around the table. To their right, at a separate table, sat a representative of the camp administration. The representative reported to the committee members that there were no disciplinary infractions recorded against me, that I did my work properly and that my behavior was satisfactory.

To the left of the committee members there was another table behind which sat the prosecutor, who had my file in front of him. When his turn came, he began by saying that I had been the leader of a Zionist group spiriting Jews to Palestine ...

When the prosecutor said the word ‘Palestine’ I saw the committee members screw up their faces. The chairman even repeated the word with a kind of abhorrence, which showed me that my prospects for success with these people were very negligible. There was no point in pretending.

After the committee members had heard the substance of the prosecutor’s re-

marks, the chairman turned to me and asked what I could tell the committee. I explained to the judge that I was born in Riga, educated in a Jewish home and a Jewish school, and that when I returned after the war to my native city and saw the harm that the local people had done to my family, my friends and my fellow Jews, I thought that I could not live there or anywhere else where Jews had been thus treated. Hence I chose to leave for the Jewish state that was about to be established.

Again I heard the horrible moan of the committee chairman: "Pa-les-tine!" How much hatred could one person squeeze into a single word!

The man looked at me and said: 'All that happened many years ago. What do you have to say to us now about your crime?'

Part of my mind knew that I had to behave like a "good boy," but I failed the test. "Ten years ago," I replied, "I did not think that my actions were anti-Soviet. I did not act out of hatred for the regime then ruling in this land. Nor today do I feel that way."

"You may go!"

I left the room knowing that this was the final sentence.

Mulka was right: "Us—no! They will not release us!"

The camp representative who left the room after me was moved. "What have you done to yourself? Why? For whom was this demonstration?" he whispered, adding that they had confirmed my sentence.

I returned to the camp and knew that I had behaved childishly. That this country has its own rules of behavior ... But I also knew that I could not, did not want to, would have been wrong to say more than what I said—and blast their freedom ...

At the camp, my friends heard my report with amazement. "Why? Why did you give them a reason to keep you here for another 15 years? You knew it was the highest authority ... What possessed you?"

The next day a few of my free friends came to the construction site, some of them Jews, to commiserate. They, too, saw my behavior as needlessly provocative. In this country, they said, there are conventions of hypocrisy that are really obligatory ...

I could not argue with them.

A man whose opinion I was ready to accept, who was a true friend, said to me: "I understand that it is hard for you to express remorse for your actions, but you should know that you will not have another chance to change the sentence, unless you turn to Voroshilov. Find a way of wording it that won't humiliate you. To argue about the severity of the sentence, to stand up for your rights, does not mean that you regret your action. The ten years you have spent here have been heavy punishment ... Write to Voroshilov, demand a reconsideration while emphasizing the severity of the sentence."

I took his advice.

On September 4, 1956, I wrote a letter to the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union Kliment Voroshilov, which said as follows:

To the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet

K. Voroshilov

From Prisoner Yankelovitch Yacov ben Mendel

Year of birth: 1919; 11; 10-II; §58-1a

Pursuant to a decision of the Special Court of the Ministry for State Security of 30.08.47, I was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment in labor rehabilitation camps.

My term began on 27.09.46.

My address—Omsk, PO Box 4X-16

On 26 August 1956 the committee to reexamine prisoners' sentences, acting in your name, decided to leave my sentence unchanged. Since the considerations of the committee were not communicated to me, I am turning to you.

I do not deny that my testimony during the investigation, and other material presented to me, are congruent with the truth; nor do I deny that I took the actions I took from Zionist motives, and there is no doubt that my activities are punishable. However—

Is it necessary to continue to incarcerate me in a labor camp, if one takes into account that the activities I engaged in were over ten years ago, and if one takes into consideration also my achievements at work, and that I have already served 13.5 years in prison; and this, despite my not being a spy, a saboteur, or a murderer, nor have I gone over to the enemy, nor used force, nor fought against the existing regime in the Soviet Union, nor called for its overthrow.

Can one state that the acts I committed were so cruel and inhuman that only the terrible sentence of twenty-five years in prison is appropriate for me?

And finally, can one possibly justify the fact that for two years I have asked for a review of my case which is mandatory under the law and the constitution, but neither the Prosecutor-General nor the Central Committee of the Party nor the High Court have bothered to even notify me whether my case will have a hearing?

I hope that, from you, I shall receive a reply.

(signed)

4 September, 1956

I signed it and mailed it.

I continued working. The camp's population shrank. Branches of our camp were taken down one after another and all the remaining prisoners were centrally housed in the camp in which I was held.

I had no friends left to talk to; my friends parted from me, and went. Via common friendships with other free people, I would get letters from them.

I began getting used to the thought that in the foreseeable future, I would not be leaving. My connection with my two relatives in Riga continued. Notably, the pressure on them diminished, a sign of the times.

On the evening of 15 January 1957, I was sitting in the camp office dealing with some summaries of the work sheets of prisoners employed in the factory next to the camp. A Lithuanian prisoner who served as a messenger boy in the office of the Special Department of the camp came running to me and said that I should report immediately to the superintendent. I thought it was something bureaucratic, that I had to sign something saying that it was known to me that my request had been forwarded for handling to such-and-such an office, and I told the messenger that I would go the next day—that I had to finish my work. But the young man pleaded with me, smiling:

“Come—come!” he said: “I think there is good news waiting for you.”

When I entered the superintendent's office, he offered me his hand to shake. That was it! Something shifted in my heart ... They are not permitted to shake hands with a prisoner. Was I free?

The officer smiled. “How much money have you accumulated in the camp treasury?” he asked.

I told him the amount and he said it was more than he had. I pointed out that I do not drink vodka ...

He took from his drawer an official document and read to me the new sentence of the Military *Kolega* of the Supreme Court. It said that the article concerning anti-Soviet propaganda had been nullified and that the sentence of 25 years' imprisonment was fixed at ten. Since that period of time had passed—they were obliged to release me immediately “from the guard responsible for me” and send me out as free—a formulation which meant that my rights regarding place of residence and choice of occupation were greatly restricted. Nonetheless, I knew that this was a major turning point in my life.

The next day I was photographed, they prepared my certificate of release, and there ensued a lot of running around after clerks whose signatures were required on various permits.

I asked one of my friends who used to go to the city without a guard if he would telegraph my relatives in Riga that I had been freed. In fact they learned of it from Ruth, who was summoned to the office of the security services in Riga, where they notified her that the punishment for her brother and me had been

reduced to ten years ... It is not hard to imagine what she must have felt.

On the morning of 17 January 1957, I walked out past the fence. It was about fifteen kilometers to the outskirts of Omsk. I saw a truck for hauling concrete standing there, its driver alongside it. I asked him to take me to the city and took out my packet of bills.

The driver gestured at the concrete: "Don't you see that?"

I told him that I had been freed after a fifteen-year reduction in my sentence from the original twenty-five years. He looked at me a long time and told me to get into the cab. He started the truck and drove out.

"Hey, how is it possible to live for ten years with such a sentence? Ten years, you said?"

I choked up, unable to say a word.

The man brought me to a friend of mine, a young Russian who had been freed about a month before me and had brought his address to me at the camp. The driver refused to take any money from me, wished me well and drove away.

In the room where my friend lived with his wife and their two children, there was a small bed for the baby and a wobbly table. In the corner was a pile of straw, where the parents and their daughter slept. No bed, no closet, no chair. My friend was at work, but his wife had heard about me. She hugged me and blessed me: "Please, stay with us as long as you like and as long as you need a roof over your head ... "

I thanked her, put my bundle in a corner and went out to look for a post office.

I took a form and telegraphed my address in Omsk to Israel.

Thus began my journey *artza* ... home to Israel.

Four years later, the plane that was bringing me home touched down at Lod.

The man who was waiting for me at the airport took my passport from me, put it in his pocket, and said to the Jewish Agency clerk who would record the relevant information on my immigrant's card—my *te'udat oleh*: "Let him tell you himself."

Glossary

Place names, foreign terms, and public figures

This glossary contains foreign terms transliterated from at least three different alphabets. The place names cover an area whose political borders have shifted several times over the past 75 years, with resulting changes of spelling. While much care has been taken to avoid glaring errors, choices had to be made; some readers may disagree with some of the choices.

abam	Yiddish acronym for abi men zet zich “as we see each other again”
Abakumov, Viktor	(1908 to 1954) Soviet Minister for State Security from 1946 to 1951
Abez	Prison camp in northeast Russia
Alitus	Town in Lithuania near Polish border
aliya	Immigration by Jews to Palestine / Israel
Alma-Ata	Former capital of Kazakhstan, now Almaty
amcha	Yiddish idiom for “one of us” or “ordinary people”
Antropovo	Rural area in Russia near Kirov, surrounded by kolkhozy
Arlosoroff, Chaim	(1899 to 1933) Zionist leader in British Mandate Palestine, assassinated in Palestine
Ashkabad	Capital of Turkmenistan
Astrakhan	City in southeastern Russia
Ayelet Hashahar	Kibbutz in northern Israel
Babel, Isaak	Ukrainian Jewish author
Baley	Prison camp in eastern Siberia

banditim	(Hebrew) “bandits”
Bar Kochba	Jewish leader of revolt against Romans in 132 CE
Baranovich	City in western Belarus
Beria, Lavrenti	(1899 to 1953) Soviet politician, chief of secret police infamous for his brutality; in office in various positions from 1934 to 1953
Betar	Revisionist Zionist youth movement, founded 1923 in Riga by Ze’ev Jabotinsky
Bet Hillel, Bet Shammai	Two antagonistic schools of Jewish thought during the first century
Bezhetsk	Town in Tver District of Russia
bezkonvoyny	(Russian) “without a guard”
Bialystok	Large city in northeastern Poland
Bira	City and river in Birobidzhan.
Birobidzhan	Administrative center of the Jewish autonomous district in the Soviet Union.
Borisovo	Town in Belorussia, near Minsk
Borokhov Youth	Zionist socialist youth movement, named after Dov Ber Borokhov, one of the founders of the Labor Zionist movement.
Bratislava	Capital of Slovakia
Brest	City in western Belorussia, at Polish border
bricha	(Hebrew) literally, “flight” or “escape”, name of operation to smuggle Jews out of the Soviet Union to European points of departure and onward to Palestine / Israel
b’seder	(Hebrew) “in order”, OK
b’yagon she’ola	(Hebrew) “to the grave in misery” Genesis 44:31, signifying grief in old age
Bukharin, Nikolai	(1888 to 1938) Soviet revolutionary
Bund	“General Jewish Workers’ Union in Lithuania, Po-

	land and Russia,” anti-Zionist Jewish socialist secular party, founded in Russia 1897
Cantonist	Jews, mostly underage, conscripted to military service in Tsarist Russia
Chekists	Members of Cheka, a Soviet security organization
Chevreh	See Hevreh
Daagdeh	Revisionist stronghold, Poland or Lithuania, location unknown
Dekabrists	Leaders of failed Russian revolt 26. December 1825, also Decembrists
Doctor Nachman Maisel	See Maisel, Nachman
Doctor’s Plot	(1953), alleged conspiracy of prominent Jewish medical specialists to murder leading Soviet government and party officials, revealed as fabrication by 1954
Dolhinov	Village in Belorussia, destroyed by the Germans in World War Two
Donetsk Valley	Region in Ukraine, also Dnepr-Donetsk
do svedanya	(Russian) “until we see each other again”, farewell
Dvinsk	Russian name for Latvian city of Daugavpils
Dzhantuy	Forced labor camp in northern Russia
Ein Gev	Kibbutz on the shores of the Sea of Galilee
El maleh rachamim	(Hebrew) “God full of Mercy,” funeral prayer
Ehrenburg, Ilya	(1891 to 1967) Soviet Russian writer
Eretz Yisrael	(Hebrew) “the land of Israel”
folksfarzamlungen	(Yiddish) “people’s gatherings”
Fergana	Town in Uzbekistan
Fidruya	Town on Latvian-Polish border
Frunze	Capital of Kyrgyzstan, new name Bishkek
gabbai	(Hebrew) treasurer of a congregation

gar'in	(Hebrew) literally “core,” a group of future Ziononist settlers in Palestine / Eretz Yisrael
German-Soviet Non-Agression Pact	See Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact t
Gomulka, Wladyslav	(1905 to 1982) Polish Communist leader 1943 to 1970
Gordonia	Zionist pioneer youth movement founded 1923 in Galicia
Gorky	City on the Volga River, named for Maxim Gorky in 1932, reverted to former name Nizhny Novgorod in 1990
Gorshenin, Konstantin	State Prosecutor-General 1943 to 1948
goy, pl. goyim	(Hebrew) non-Jew, Gentile
Grochov	Training kibbutz near Warsaw
hachshara	(Hebrew) “preparation” training program for life in Palestine (see: Kibbutz hachshara); plural, hachsharot
Hagalil	Unit in the Zionist movement
Hanita	Paramilitary youth group of Hashomer Hatzair movement, see also Hashomer Hatzair
Hashomer Hatzair	Socialist Zionist youth movement founded 1913 in Galicia
hazak v'amatz	(Hebrew) “be strong and of good courage!”
Hechalutz	Zionist-Socialist youth movements' umbrella organization
Hevreh	(Hebrew) our people, our gang, our group
Homel	Town in Belarus
Horodyszcze	Village in Poland
Iassy	Town in Moldova
Inta	Forced labor camp in northeast Russia
Irbit	Town in Russia, near Sverdlovsk
Irkutsk	Large city in Siberia

ish l'ohalecha yisra'el	(Hebrew)" each to his tent, Israel" meaning "everyone [should return] to his place,"(1 Kings 12:6-7; 2 Chronicles 10:19)
Jewish Brigade	Jewish Infantry Brigade Group, military formation of British Army, serving in Europe during World War Two. Its members fought Germans in Italy. After the war, some assisted Holocaust survivors to emigrate illegally to Israel, as part of Aliya Bet.
Kalinin	City on the Volga River north of Moscow, named for Mikhail Kalinin, Soviet revolutionary in 1931, reverted to its former name of Tver in 1990
kashrut	Set of Jewish dietary laws
katorga	System of penal servitude in Tsarist Russia
Kazan	Capital of Tartarstan, Russia
Kemerovo	District in Siberia
Kfar Giladi	Kibbutz in Northern Israel
Khabarovsk	City in Siberia
Kharkov	City in Ukraine
khranit vetchno	(Russian) "preserve permanently," stamped on prisoner case files
kibbutz hachshara	(Hebrew) training kibbutz in the diaspora
Kinneret	Sea of Galilee; also, name of a kibbutz in that area
Kirghizia	Former name for Kyrgyzstan
Kirov	City in eastern Russia, center for refugees from Latvia
Kishinev	Town in Moldova, site of pogrom April 1903
Klaipeda	Town in Lithuania
Klooga	Concentration camp in Estonia during Nazi occupation
Kuban Famine	Famine caused by Soviet leadership's forced collectivization of farming, 1932 to 1933 in Ukraine and northern Caucasus

Königsberg	German name of Kaliningrad, part of German Reich until 1945
kolkhoz	Soviet agricultural communes
Komsomol	Soviet Youth Organization
Kommuna	Commune
Konsultatsia	Literally “consultation” term for a law firm, in the Soviet system
kontrazvedka	(Russian) “counter-intelligence”
konz-lager	Concentration camp
Kopeysk	City in Russia
Kovno	Russian name for Lithuanian city of Kaunas
Kozhva	City in Russia
Kraslava	Russian city near border with Poland, Yiddish: Kreslavka
Krasnoyarsk	City in Siberia
Krasnoyarsk prison	Forced labor camp in Siberia
Kugai	Russian city in Central Asia
Kurland	Province of western Latvia
Kuzbass	Coalmining area in Russia
Kuznetsk Mountains	Mountain range in southern Siberia
Lake Ladoga	Freshwater lake in northwest Russia
Lazerson, Professor Max	Labor Zionist, member of Latvian parliament until 1934, emigrated to United States in 1939
Lefortovo	Notorious Soviet prison in Moscow
Lezginka	National dance of people of the Caucasus Mountains
Lida	Town in western Belorussia
Liepaja	Latvian port city
Lodz	City in central Poland

Lubyanka	Notorious Soviet prison in Moscow
Lukiskes Prison	Prison in the center of Vilnius, Lithuania
Lvov	City in southeastern Poland, now Ukraine
macher	(Yiddish) “wheeler-dealer”
ma’on	Hebrew code word for safe house, or base
Majdanek	Nazi death camp in Poland
Maisel, Dr. Nachman	Bund leader
Mauser	Type of firearm
Mayakovsky, Vladimir	(1893 to 1930) Russian poet
Mazari Sharif	Afghan town near Soviet border
Meyerson, Golda	(1898 to 1978) later Golda Meir, Israeli politician, fourth prime minister of Israel 1969 to 1974
me’ayin atah?	(Hebrew) “where are you from?”
Merkulov, Vsevolod	Head of NKVD
MGB	Soviet Ministry for State Security
miglag	Transit camp in the osoblag (special camps) system
Mossad L’Aliya Bet	(Hebrew) Institution for Immigration B, operating 1938 to 1948
Munkacs	Capital of Transcarpathia, Ukraine
Namangan	Uzbek city, east of Tashkent
naryadchik	(Russian) “work assigner, supervisor”
Nerchinsk	City in Siberia
Netzach	Labor Zionist movement founded by Niuma Levitan in 1931
Neverov, Aleksandr	(1886 to 1923) Soviet Russian writer, author of Tashkent City of Bread
NKVD	Abbreviation for People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, Soviet public and secret police 1934 to 1954

Novosibirsk	City in Siberia
Novoyelna	Small town in Belorussia
Nowogrodek	Small town in Belorussia
Ochranka	Tsarist-era secret services
Omsk	City in Siberia
Orsha	City in Belorussia
osoblag	Network of camps for political prisoners
ossoboeya soveshchanya	Secret “special council”
Petchora	Forced labor camp, also largest river in northern Russia and town in the area
Petliura massacres	Pogroms in Ukraine during revolution of 1917, named after Simon Petliura, Ukrainian Secretary of Military Affairs 1917 to 1918
Pitovranov, Yevgeny	(1915 to 1999) Lieutenant General, Minister of State Security
podpolkovnik	(Russian) “lieutenant colonel”
Polesia	Town near Baranovich
Polish-Soviet Repatriation Agreement	Agreement signed by Polish Committee of National Liberation and Soviet Union in September 1944, to deal with repatriation of Polish citizens from Soviet Union to Poland
polkovnik	(Russian) “colonel”
Ponary	Nazi mass execution site in Poland, now Lithuania, between July 1941 and August 1944
Praga	Suburb of Warsaw
pridurky	(Russian) term to describe labor camp inmates who do not work
Proletarskaya Street	Location of conservatory dormitory in the Jewish quarter of Tashkent
propiska	(Russian) identity card, residence permit

protektsia	(Russian) “pull, connections”
punkt	(Yiddish) Literally “dot”, location of rendezvous
Pushkin Street	Street in Tashkent
Rezekne	Town in Latvia
Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact	Nazi-Soviet Pact signed August 23, 1939
rubles	Russian currency
Rumbuli Forest	Site of Nazi massacre near Riga, Latvia
Sarafand	Military base in Israel
Saransk	City in central European Russia
Sarni	Town in Northern Poland
Shavli	Yiddish name for Siauliai, city in Lithuania, location of ghetto
sheigetz	(Yiddish) non-Jewish young male
Shomer Hatzair	See Hashomer Hatzair
Shulchan Aruch	Jewish Code of Law
Shymkent	City in Kazakhstan, until 1993 known by the Russian name of Chimkent
Siguranta	Romanian secret service, later Securitate
Sikorski, Wladyslaw	(1881 to 1943) Polish political and military leader 1939 to 1943
Slonim	City in Belorussia
Soviet-Polish Repatriation Committee	see Polish-Soviet Repatriation Agreement
Special Department	osobi idjel Military arm of Soviet security services
spravka	(Russian) “Certificate” demobilization certificate
Stolypin cars	Prisoners’ railroad cars named after Pyotr Stolypin, Interior Minister and Prime Minister of Russia
strashina	(Russian) Sergeant Major

Stryj	Town in Poland, now in Ukraine
Sverdlovsk	Russian city in the Ural Mountains
tallit	(Hebrew) prayer shawl
Tchita	City in Siberia.
te'udat oleh	(Hebrew) Identity card of new immigrant to Israel
Termez	City in southern Uzbekistan, near Afghan border
Tien Shan Mountains	Mountain range in Central Asia
Torņakalns	Riga suburb
Troitsk	Town in Russia, Chelyabinsk province
Tsaddik	(Hebrew) righteous, decent person
Tver	See Kalinin
Uchkurgan	Border town on Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border
Ulan-Udeh	City in Eastern Siberia
Ulmanis, Karlis	Latvian politician; leader of right-wing coup d'état in 1934
Valdai	Town in Novgorod Province, Russia.
valizkovem	(Russian) “with suitcase in hand”
Vileyka	Town in Belorussia, near Minsk
Viliya River	River in Belorussia
Vilna	Russian name for Vilnius, capital of Lithuania
Vologda	City in northwest Russia, location of transit prison
Vorkuta	Prison camp in northeast Russia
Voroshilov, Kliment	(1881 to 1969) Soviet military commander and statesman
Voznesensky, Nikolai	(1903 to 1950) Soviet economic planner 1941 to 1949
Yaroslavl	City in Russia, northeast of Moscow
Yegorshino	Town in Russia, Sverdlovsk region

<i>zasada</i>	(Russian) “ambush”
Zinovyev, Aleksandr	(1922 to 2006) Soviet political figure and dissident
Zlochov	Town in Poland, may now be in Ukraine
Złoty	Polish currency
Zuyevka	Village in Russia, near Kirov